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JOUGI SHIRAISHI
ILLUSTRATION AZURE

WANDERING WITCH

The Journey of Elaina





Well, it's okay, but...

The Ashen Witch ELAINA

A young woman who holds the title of "witch," the highest rank among mages. Currently wandering the world from place to place, entirely enjoying her solo adventure.



THE JOURNEY OF ELAINA
+ CHARACTERS



HALVERIE
A magical doll
created in Flower
Garden Theomea.



ORONELLA
A vampire who
is taking a tour of
human lands.



**PUPPET
DETECTIVE**
A detective who
is equipped with
the Professor
(right hand) and
her Assistant
(left hand).





Bleeech...how awful!
It stinks...! You're
the worst...

I suppose you thought
I was really asleep?

©Azure



...I'll
remember
that.

Well then, I
guess this is
good-bye.

Then she took one step beyond the border of
the waste disposal facility. She stepped forward
into unknown territory.

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WANDERING WITCH 11
The Journey of Elaina

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The Journey of Elaina

JOUGI SHIRAISHI

Illustration
AZURE

11


NEW YORK

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Wandering Witch: The Journey of Elaina JOUGI SHIRAISHI

Translation by Nicole Wilder

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CHAPTER 1

The Case of the Blood-Drenched Diner

“Kyaaaaaahhh!”

A shriek echoed through a restaurant in a certain city. And yet not a single person inside had any reaction to the woman’s sorrowful wailing.

It happened while all the lights in the restaurant were off, just as a cake was being carried over to a couple seated next to the window. Lively music accompanied the event.

There was a warm round of applause for the happy couple. They were celebrating their one-year anniversary at a fancy restaurant. The restaurant’s status as one of the top three in the country was subject to some debate, though. It was sheer coincidence that each person in the restaurant—myself included—was present for the couple’s happy moment. Nonetheless, the spirited applause felt genuine.

Because everyone in the restaurant was caught up in the moment, we all—myself included—assumed the woman’s shriek was one of unbridled joy.

However, there was definitely something off about it...

...Because the shriek had not come from the window seat where the cake had been delivered. It came from deeper inside the restaurant.

The cake was placed on the couple’s table, the candle flames dancing to the music, and after a warm round of applause, the lights in the restaurant were turned back on.

In contrast to the celebration of the two people by the window, I sensed something disturbing was taking place in the back of the restaurant. So I turned around to look, after-dinner teacup in my hand.

“Is this for real...?”

I got goose bumps.

What I saw shocked me so much, I nearly dropped my cup.

The back of the restaurant had been transformed into a gruesome scene, far removed from the momentous occasion up front.

Lying on the floor was a beautiful young woman. Her white dress was splattered with red, and an expanding pool of the same color was slowly soaking into the very expensive-looking carpet of the three-star restaurant, utterly ruining it.

That was when it finally dawned on us.

We had a very messy situation on our hands...



“Someone wrapped their arms around me from behind and touched my boobs!” blurted the woman who had been lying on the floor as she sat up.

“.....”

Yes, the woman was alive and well.

Being molested by a stranger in the dark seemed to have caused her incredible distress, for the woman’s lips were pressed stiffly together, her cheeks were puffed out, and her made-up face was red with rage.

The angry woman at the center of the red-soaked clothes and carpet was a bizarre sight, to say the least, and all the people in the restaurant gathered around her. Of course, I was no exception.

It was around that time I realized the red liquid dripping from the woman wasn’t actually blood.

“...That smells strong.”

It was alcohol.

Looking carefully, I saw a wine bottle lying on the carpet. It reeked of booze.

“Hey! Someone just called me smelly! Even though I’m the victim here!”

The woman burst into tears.

Who on earth could have been guilty of making such a statement, without a shred of consideration for the victim?

That’s right, it was me.

“Is that red wine all over you?”

With a cool expression on my face, as if I hadn't just put my foot in my mouth, I stepped out of the circle of noisy onlookers crowded around the woman. I crouched down, and when I touched the stain that was spreading across the carpet, the red liquid stuck to my fingertips.

When I sniffed it, as expected, it had the scent of wine.

“Of *course* it's wine! You can tell just by looking! Who do you take me for?!”

“Um, this is the first time we've met, so...”

I don't even know her name, so I'll call her Wine Lady for now. Y'know, since she's covered in it.

Now, let's establish the facts.

Immediately after the lights in this swanky restaurant were lowered for the celebration, a woman's scream rang out, and when the lights came back up, a woman covered in red wine (Wine Lady) was lying on the floor. And to make matters worse, the woman claims that her chest was fondled while the lights were out.

I see, I see.

“Smells like foul play...,” an employee behind me mumbled, wearing a somewhat bemused expression.

I can't smell anything but wine.

“This is terrible...” One man in the circle surrounding the woman furrowed his brow. He was the owner of the restaurant. “This carpet is a priceless antique. I have no choice but to seek restitution now that it is so badly soiled...”

Now that's a problem.

“This is terrible...” Just then, another man spoke up from the crowd of people surrounding the woman. “Our anniversary date was ruined by this commotion... Why don't you waive the fee for the cake, and we'll call it even?”

How dare you try to take advantage of this disturbance?

“This is terrible...” A third person spoke up. It was a sweaty man with a body

like a barrel. “The dinner I’d been so eagerly anticipating finally arrived, but now I’m glued to the crime scene, and I worry my food will get cold...”

Then why don’t you just go eat it...?

Sadly, all the men around Wine Lady seemed wholly incompetent.

“How cruel! Men are always like this! They only ever think about themselves! Ugh, I hate men!” the woman cried as she launched into broad condemnation.

And then...

“Well, well. This reeks of foul play. Wouldn’t you agree, my dear Assistant?”

“I would, Professor.”

From out of nowhere, two voices rang out. One was the very calm voice of an adult woman. The other was the soft voice of a child—at least, I think it was a kid. For some reason, the two voices sort of sounded like they were coming from the same person.

The voices resembled each other very closely, almost like one person was playing the roles of two different people.

When I turned around to look, I saw a young woman standing a short distance from the ring of people encircling Wine Lady.

“.....”

She looked to be in her mid-twenties. A hunting cap was perched on top of her light brown hair, and she was wearing an extremely long trench coat. She was dressed up to look just like a detective, and for some reason, she had a puppet over each hand.

Her light red eyes darted left to right as she repeatedly made the puppets face each other and act out little scenarios.

“The culprit is here among us.”

“They sure are, Professor.”

“I shall assume the role of investigator.”

I was irritated, and the other spectators were confused. Without glancing toward or paying attention to those around her, the girl dressed as a detective

flapped her puppets' mouths open and closed.



“By the way, Professor, what does foul play smell like?”

“Like red wine, I suppose.”

Between the chattering puppets, the detective was wearing a rather elated expression.

“.....”

Great, another weirdo...



“Heh-heh-heh... How about a kiss, dear Assistant?”

“Ah, we mustn’t, Professor. Not here...”

“.....”

Yep, this was definitely annoying.

The young woman looked absolutely ridiculous, but apparently she was rather well-known, and several people in the restaurant started to make a fuss.

“Ah...that’s...!”

“It’s her...! The Puppet Detective!”

“I can’t believe she’s here in this restaurant...!”

So she’s known as the Puppet Detective?

“Is she really that famous?” I pushed my way in among several people who were talking noisily so that I could listen in on their conversation.

The gossiping people nodded together.

“Yeah... I’ve only heard rumors about her, but...apparently she reasons her way through cases by making her hand puppets talk to each other.”

That’s a pretty odd quirk.

“By the way, her powers of deduction aren’t anything to write home about. I’d say the most impactful thing about her is her outfit.”

Well, that was mean...

“And to be honest, her look is so cheap that she took first place in the

Detectives with Sloppy Character Designs rankings.”

In the what rankings?

“That reminds me, she also took first place in the Detectives with Creepy Fetishes rankings, because she gets uncomfortably handsy with the young ladies.”

I’m sorry, the what rankings?!

“In short, she’s your garden-variety creep.”

There we go.

That was the POV of an expert on the subject.

Sounds like she’s nothing but a creep...

Meanwhile, the detective who was having her name dragged through the mud didn’t seem to be the least bit interested in solving the case, even though she looked the part. She was still playing with her puppets, so as I handed Wine Lady a towel, I made a proposal to the owner.

“Would you like me to magically put the wine that’s been soaked into the dress and the carpet back where it came from?”

If the woman’s chest had been groped in the dark, then there was no doubt the culprit was among us, but before we could deal with that, we had to deal with Wine Lady, who was still soaked in wine.

We couldn’t just leave her like that. She was letting out these adorable little sneezes, which meant she had probably already caught a chill from being in wet clothes.

You’ll get sick if you don’t dry off, you know?

“Wait. Miss Witch, could I ask you to hold off for a little while?”

Behind the restaurant owner, the detective was forcing the puppets on her hands into a furious embrace. They were crumpled together.

“Mwah!”

“Oh, Professor, you mustn’t!”

That doesn't look like any kiss I've ever seen...

"...Wait. But what for?" I ignored the bizarre spectacle on view behind the owner.

"From the look of it, the wine that spilled from the bottle soiled this lady and the carpet on the floor. I think I ought to get the person responsible to pay for the damages," he replied.

Oh, I see.

"We should preserve the crime scene so we can investigate, is that what you're saying?"

"Assistant, my darling Assistant!" the professor puppet proclaimed.

"Professor, I love you...!" the assistant puppet replied.

"Yes, that's exactly it," the owner said. "For now, just in case, let's leave all the food and drinks on the other tables right where they are until we solve this case. We don't know where we might find a clue that'll lead us to the culprit."

"If that's what you think is best, that's what we'll do," I agreed. "But...won't that leave her in soaking-wet clothes?"

"Assistant..."

"Professor..."

"Yes, well, I'll have her change into one of the restaurant's spare uniforms instead."

"I see... So then you want me to use magic to restore her clothes and the carpet after we solve the case, is that right?"

"Assistant...!"

"Professor...!"

"Is that possible, Lady Witch?"

"Yeah, sure... It's just that the more time passes, the more rapidly the magical energy dissipates, so we need to start resolving this situation as quickly as possible, or it may be too late."

“Assistant!”

“Professor!”

“Oh my, is that so...? In that case, we must seek out the culprit immediately.”

“Assistant!”

“Professor!”

“Assistant!”

“Professor!”

“.....”

“.....”

“Assista—”

“What’s going on over there?!”

I finally lashed out at the girl, who was still making the puppets on her hands embrace. However, in response to me glaring daggers at her, she not only looked slightly proud of herself but proceeded to brush me off with a nonsensical statement: “A lovers’ chat...I suppose?”

So I take it that you have no intention of solving this case?

“How about doing the job you’re all dressed up for? You *are* a detective, aren’t you?” I said, somewhat nonchalantly.

“Oh!” She smiled broadly. “So you’ve gleaned my true identity. Good work.”

“It wasn’t that hard, considering how you’re dressed...”

Actually, didn’t you give yourself away earlier? Weren’t you going to “assume the role of investigator”?

“You seem to have a rather keen eye for observation. Perhaps I’ll appoint *you* to be my assistant.”

“What are you talking about all of a sudden?”

“Ah, but the Professor on my right hand already has her Assistant here on my left hand, so things will get a little confusing if you’re called assistant, too. In that case, you can be my sidekick.”

“Seriously, what are you talking about?”

“By the way, Sidekick, did you finish your conversation with the owner?”

Oh, so I guess the idea of me helping you is a done deal already?

Well, if the question is whether or not I finished talking to him, I guess I did.

“...First of all, to keep damages to a minimum, it sounds like we must solve the case with the utmost haste.”

I mean, I wasn't the one who spilled the wine, so I wouldn't mind sitting back with a cool look on my face as if nothing happened, but according to what the owner said, it seems like the restaurant is on lockdown until the culprit is found, so until we reach a solution, I guess I'm stuck here.

What we need here is swift and skillful crime-solving.

“I get the picture. That means it's time for me to step in, isn't it?”

“Have you figured out who the culprit is?”

“Heh-heh-heh.”

“You haven't, have you?” I turned to her with an unamused expression.

Flapping the mouth of the puppet on her right hand (aka the Professor), the detective lowered her voice somewhat.

“Honestly, I just got back from the bathroom, so I don't really know what's going on,” the puppet said.

“The biggest question is that of suspects and the like, right?”

“Which is why we'll start interviewing witnesses now. Sidekick, I want you to back me up. Don't worry. Once we get that information, we'll sort this out quickly,” the detective said, the expression on her face brimming with mysterious confidence.

Of course, I was planning to refuse. I intended to politely turn her down, to hit her with a no. I couldn't think of any job more bothersome.

However...

“I, too, am requesting your help.”

Jumping in along with the detective was the owner of the restaurant, who had been standing right next to me, listening intently to our conversation.

“Would you come with me for a moment?” the owner asked. He led me over to a corner of the restaurant and spoke in a very low whisper, even though there was no one around us.

“I want to make sure things don’t get any more serious than they are now. You see, there’s some debate as to whether this restaurant ranks among the top three in the country, so...”

“...Mm.”

“And honestly, I’m also worried about relying on that strange woman...”

“.....”

It would probably cause trouble for the business if their sales dropped because the restaurant was a crime scene. The fact that the owner was so eager to bring the incident to a close quietly told me that his intention was to extract a fine from the culprit and bring the curtain down on the whole affair.

The owner brought his mouth close to my ear and mumbled so that no one else could hear, “If I can get you to solve this thing, I’ll waive your bill for this evening. I’m also prepared to pay you a little reward.”

Oh?

“And I’d be happy to offer you loaves of our signature bread as thanks.”

Seriously?

“How about it?”

“I swear to you I will catch the criminal!”

Standing before the restaurant owner, wearing a wide smile, was someone possessed of a greedy heart.

Who on earth could it have been?

That’s right, it’s me (for the second time today).

And so...

After making this secret arrangement with the owner, I walked back over to the detective with an innocent look on my face.

“Well then, Detective, let’s find this culprit, shall we?”

Suddenly, I was eager to get to work.

“I knew I could count on my sidekick.”

“So what do you need me to do?”

“Sidekick, you know how I have the Professor on my right hand and her Assistant on my left hand?”

“Huh? Yes.”

“Basically, you’ll be doing the same job as them.”

“Oh, absolutely not.”

At any rate, that’s how our joint search for the culprit began.

But in a criminal investigation, there are certain set things that ought to be done first.

I fitted a puppet that I just happened to have with me onto my right hand and flapped its mouth open and closed.

“All right, let’s start with the interviews, shall we, Detective?” asked the falsetto voice.

.....

The detective turned an extremely cold eye on me.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

Hmm? What do you mean?

“Didn’t you know? It’s all the rage in this country right now.”

“And I’m none too pleased about it. It’s the very essence of foolishness to think you can gain popularity by making up some cheap character.”

“Do you hear yourself?” I replied.

“You’re sorely mistaken if you think you can stand out as a character just by

putting on a puppet!”

“Oh my! There’s no helping it, you know. They say birds of a feather flock together,” came the high-pitched response.

“Knock it off!”

Well, since I’d gone to the trouble of getting it out, I kept the puppet on my hand while I investigated the incident as the assistant—no, the sidekick—to the detective.

“Now there are two weirdos...”

The owner of the restaurant seemed to be rather stressed out, but I didn’t pay him any mind.



I wanted to hear from Wine Lady, the victim of the crime, first. But following the restaurant owner’s suggestion, she had disappeared into the back in order to borrow one of the restaurant’s spare uniforms. So, while we were waiting, we decided to hear from the eyewitnesses one by one.

“I believe I’m the one who first uncovered the crime.”

First up was a member of the restaurant staff.

Actually, it was misleading to say he had been the one to first discover the crime, since it had been committed in darkness, but I did recall that this staff member had rushed over to Wine Lady before anyone else. I also remembered that he had been the one to make the cryptic comment “Smells like foul play...” To put it simply, he was kind of a strange guy.

“It surprised me. Right after the lights came back on, I spotted her lying on the floor. I mistook the wine soaking the carpet for blood, and I remember panicking.”

“I see.” The detective nodded. She had a hand over her mouth and seemed to be deep in thought about something. Incidentally, that hand still had a puppet on it, so it looked like she had a puppet going to town on her lips. I couldn’t help but wonder how she was conducting herself like this with a straight face.

The staff member’s testimony generally agreed with my understanding of the

situation, and I sensed nothing particularly out of place, but the detective didn't seem to think so.

"It's strange." She narrowed her eyes. "Did you see exactly what caused her to fall?"

"Huh? I'm not sure how to answer that... She just happened to fall, I guess...?"

"In other words, what you're saying is...you just happened to be standing in a spot where you could see her, and when the lights came on, you saw that she just happened to be lying on the floor—"

"Y-yeah. That's right...?"

"And coincidences like that just happen, do they...?"

Sure they do.

Perhaps she had a skeptical nature, for the detective then just narrowed her eyes and muttered, "Do they, though? Sounds fishy..."

It may be a common trope in mystery novels to have the first person on the scene turn out to be the culprit, but in this case, he didn't seem like anything more than an upstanding employee who really did discover the incident first. I felt pity for the man and urged the detective, "Let's listen to what the other guests have to say."

"He was a little suspicious, wasn't he, Assistant?"

"He sure was, Professor."

The detective was making her puppets talk to each other.

My puppet's mouth also started flapping. "Now, now, wouldn't it be premature to decide he's the culprit?" it asked in its falsetto voice.

"Doesn't that feel cheap?" I added, giving the Puppet Detective a pitying stare.

"How dare you say that?"

Well then, I suppose I must relay how the questioning of the second and subsequent witnesses went. Unfortunately, the crime had been committed in the dark, and moreover, everyone in the restaurant had been paying attention

to the couple by the window, so it would be no exaggeration to say that we got basically no new information.

“Before I realized anything had happened, the woman was on the floor, and the sight of her gave me quite the fright. But I’m sorry, I was sitting here the whole time, so I can’t really offer any more information... I hope you catch the culprit soon.” The woman who had been spending her one-year anniversary in the booth by the window showed concern for Wine Lady.

What a good person.

“How could this terrible atrocity happen on our anniversary...?” Then there was the man who had been celebrating a year with his lover... He was already back in his seat, staring at the cake that was slowly getting stale. “It’s only right that they should waive the fee for the cake, at the very least, right? Though it’d be nice if I could get them to pay me some compensation while they’re at it.” His head seemed full of nothing but thoughts of money.

We finished interviewing the couple, but the detective had a peevish look on her face as her puppet chowed down on her mouth as usual.

“It’s strange...”

“Something on your mind?”

“I wonder what that woman sees in him...”

“I was wondering the same thing,” replied the falsetto voice as my right hand nodded along.

But that didn’t seem to have anything to do with the crime, so I dropped it.

Then we resumed our investigation.

“...It—it wasn’t me! She was already on the floor by the time I noticed her, and besides, I was eating my dinner when the lights went out. S-so it couldn’t have been me!”

There was nothing inherently unusual about the next man’s testimony, but a somewhat suspicious air hung over the halting and theatrical response given by the male customer with the barrel-shaped body who had been sitting alone in the corner of the restaurant.

In order to preserve the scene, no one had been allowed to touch the dishes on the tables. Consequently, the man had been involuntarily forced to postpone his meal and had been unsettled ever since. His gaze was primarily focused on his chicken, not us.

He didn't seem to be someone who paid much attention to his own personal appearance. While we were talking to him, we were surrounded by the aromas of his cold chicken dinner and his body odor, which was strong enough to make us wrinkle our noses a little.

When the two of us were finally alone again, the detective grumbled to me with a puppet over her mouth, "That guy was kind of stinky, wasn't he, Sidekick...?"

"He sure was."

"Ewwwwwwwwwwww!" my right hand cried out in falsetto. Loudly.

In the end, our witness interviews didn't yield any results.

A few minutes later, the unfortunate female customer who had been groped in the dark and then drenched in wine, also known as Wine Lady, came back into the dining room.

She reappeared just as the detective was shoving her puppets at my shoulder and cheek out of boredom, making them bite at me while she said things like "Sidekick, give us a kiss! Come on..." and just as my right hand was responding in falsetto with things like "Don't touch me! I'll kill you!" as it viciously slapped the Puppet Detective's cheeks.

"Achoo!"

Wine Lady let out an adorable sneeze. She was dressed in the restaurant's uniform, a blouse and black skirt with an apron. She trotted over to us. "Miss Detective, have you found the culprit?"

The smell of freshly washed clothes and the faintly lingering scent of wine hung lightly on her.

"This person smells lovely, doesn't she, Sidekick?" The detective brought her face close to the nape of Wine Lady's neck and sniffed.

“Ohhh, does she now?”

The scent of wine had permeated the air around the woman.

I don't particularly care for this scent, you know?

“Ah, wait, what are you—? Stop that!”

The pitiful Wine Lady suddenly flushed crimson and fiddled with her hair. Then she told us what had happened in the darkness in detail.



“I get angry just thinking about it.”

The victim's testimony confirmed what we'd already heard several times before—the crime had taken place in the dark.

The woman had been gazing at the flickering light of the candles as she sipped her wine, offering half-hearted applause to the couple celebrating their one-year anniversary.

That was when she sensed something out of place on her chest.

...! I'm being fondled! Help, someone's touching me!

The woman said she had, without a doubt, felt a hand that had reached out from behind her grab firmly onto her right breast. There was no affection in the touch, no emotion at all. It was a crude act of lust-driven assault.

She was furious over the fact that some stranger would take advantage of the joyous moment and commit such a despicable act.

I won't let you get away with this!

Surrendering herself to the rage that boiled in her chest, the woman retaliated against the despicable criminal. At once, she gripped her wine glass and splashed its contents on the criminal behind her.

The hand that had been groping her pulled away, but that was not enough to settle Wine Lady's anger. She tightly grasped a wine bottle sitting on the table and swung it around, trying to hit the groper, who she knew must be there in the darkness.

The wild swing of the wine bottle threw the woman off balance, and she fell

down to the floor beside her table.

Then the lights came back on.

And we all knew what had happened after that.

The woman lying in the puddle of red wine that was pooling like blood lifted her head and screamed, “Someone wrapped their arms around me from behind and touched my boobs!”

And here we were.

That was the full story of the incident.

After hearing her out, the detective put on the same peevish expression as before and, giving her voice over to the puppet, said, “Something’s not quite clear.”

“.....”

Her explanation just now seemed perfectly satisfactory to me.

“What part isn’t clear?” I asked, cocking my head along with the puppet on my right hand.

The detective took a hard look at Wine Lady and asked a crazy question. “In what way were you fondled?”

“What?!” Wine Lady raised her voice just as wildly when she answered.

Seriously, what are you saying?

“I can’t really tell what happened in the dark just from your explanation. Let’s reenact it once to set the scene.”

How can you say that with such a serious look on your face?

“A r-reenactment...?” Wine Lady was obviously flustered. “Y-you want to do it here?”

“Yes. This being the scene of the crime and all.”

“Um, but...”

“If I’m not mistaken, you said the culprit groped your chest from behind, is that right?”

The detective, who had immediately taken up a position behind Wine Lady, placed both her hands on the woman's shoulders, brought her mouth close to the woman's ear, and said, "Like this, maybe?" Her mysterious enthusiasm left no room for doubt.

"Huh? Y-yeah...just like that..." Wine Lady was casually assaulted yet again.

"And it was in this condition that you suffered the harassment?"

If you're asking about harassment, I think she's suffering through it right now.

"From this position...I was groped..."

"In what way?"

"Um, well..."

"If I remember correctly, you said it was your right breast that was fondled, correct? Which means that, from this position, the culprit must have extended their right hand and stretched it out toward your chest. I'll just go ahead and—"

"W-wait!"

"What's the matter?"

"...I want you to turn the lights off."

What the heck did I just watch?

"Ewwwwwwwwwwww!" my right hand whined in falsetto at the over-the-top spectacle. Loudly.

But the two people before me must have been in their own little world, because they paid no attention to me glaring at them, or to anything else.

I can't watch this.

That was when I inserted myself between them and forced them apart. "Let's stop right there."

"Ah..." Wine Lady looked back at the detective reluctantly, with a somewhat mournful expression.

"How cruel!" the detective earnestly objected.

What about this is cruel?

“Need I remind you to do the job you’re all dressed up for?”

It’s the second time today I’ve had to use that line.

“What? I’m reenacting the crime right now, aren’t I?”

So you’re telling me you always conduct your investigations that way? Your investigative techniques are painting a very clear picture as to why people think you’re creepy...

Perhaps because she was upset that her work had been interrupted, the Puppet Detective pouted and fidgeted as she put her puppets together mouth to mouth.

Ah, I’ve seen that kiss before.

“So did you learn anything from your little demonstration?”

“Mm.”

She nodded, full of confidence.

And she said—

“She has the same type of scent to her that I do.”

I see, I see.

“In short, it’s safe to say we got nothing out of it?”

“How cruel!”



“Assistant, it seems like this case will remain unsolved, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed it does, Professor. I’m not sure whether or not we should just go ahead and give up on this one.”

After we were more or less finished with our interviews, the Puppet Detective held a conversation between her two puppets.

In short, all hope seems lost. We’ll never catch the culprit at this rate... Wait, huh?

“That’s kind of a problem for me. If we quit now, I won’t get my reward.”

Do some detecting, Detective.

“It really is unfortunate, but there was always a chance of this outcome since the crime was committed in the dark.” She shrugged. “We’ve got no clues, and the motive is unclear. As it stands, there are no conclusions that can be drawn. Oh, what a lost cause!”

She shrugged again. I’m sure it was just my imagination that she actually appeared to have *zero interest* in detective work from the moment she appeared on the scene.

But I was still in a bind.

Well then, let’s see what my right hand thinks about all this.

“The culprit probably made an impulsive and reckless attack,” said the falsetto voice.

“Oh-hoh. So you’re saying that an impulsive urge was the motive behind the crime?”

“That’s right. Because the victim was so pretty. When pretty people are around, some people feel compelled to force themselves upon them,” replied my right hand in falsetto.

“I see.” I turned around to face the Puppet Detective. “So the criminal was frustrated.”

The Puppet Detective, meanwhile, had turned a very cold eye on me. “... Doesn’t that feel cheap?”

“How dare you say that?”

“But it’s quite a good deduction to reason that someone who was frustrated would be our culprit. Surely someone who wasn’t frustrated would never touch a woman’s body without consent.”

“But I think that’s a motive anyone could come up with on the spot.”

“But, Miss Witch, I’d like you to take a look around the restaurant.”

The Puppet Detective turned toward the dining room as she flapped the mouths on both her hands.

There were all sorts of people there. The couple in the window seats who

were supposed to be celebrating their anniversary. The fat man who was dripping with sweat from having to postpone his meal. The restaurant employee who was himself playing detective. And plenty of other people besides.

Let's see now, are there any bad people in this crowd who might put their hands on a woman out of frustration?

"There aren't, huh?"

The detective asserted, "There isn't a single suspicious person in here. Just as I thought, this investigation is over."

The detective shrugged again, looking disappointed.

Are you sure about that?

"I've spotted the culprit, though."

Maybe you've got bad eyes, Detective?

The puppet on my right hand cocked her head.

"Huh...? What do you mean?" The detective stared at me.

What do you mean, what do I mean?

"Well, I'm saying that in hanging around the restaurant this long, it was simple to clock the criminal's objective. I've already figured out who our culprit is."

".....Excuse me?"

"Could I get you to gather up everybody in the restaurant right away, Detective?"

I had a feeling I had reversed our roles without realizing it, but I set that aside for the time being.

I said:

"Allow me to resolve this incident right away."



To that end, I and the puppet on my right hand presented our deductions in

front of the customers and staff whom the detective had assembled.

“The things I know about this sequence of events are probably not all that different from what you all know. The crime was committed in the dark, where the victim, this woman, had her chest groped. No one saw the culprit, and the only thing left behind at the scene of the crime was a pool of wine. Is that right?”

I flapped my right hand open and closed. “No mistakes there,” came the falsetto response.

The room got noisy.

“What was that?”

“She’s a lousy puppeteer...”

“That’s just her falsetto...”

“It’s really high...”

“No, wait! Her mouth isn’t moving! As far as that goes, she’s pretty good!”

“But it’s still a falsetto.”

“It’s too high-pitched; I couldn’t understand it.”

.....

I flapped my right hand again.

“I believe the culprit is among us,” came the falsetto voice.

“That’s awful...”

“So high-pitched...”

“Wait, sorry. I couldn’t understand that at all. What did you say?”

.....

I quietly removed the puppet from my right hand.

Immediately after I did so, the Assistant puppet was plopped down on my shoulder.

I turned to look behind me and saw the detective watching me with very

sorrowful eyes as she threw out some kind words. “Well...um...chin up?” By the way, the assistant puppet was chewing on my shoulder.

Stop that.

You shouldn't do things like that to people who aren't used to it.

Once I was released from the puppet's grip, I said in my own voice, “Actually, I've figured out who the culprit is.”

Let's review the crime.

In the restaurant with the lights turned out, the criminal committed the despicable act of groping Wine Lady's chest. But there was something strange about this incident from the start.

“The victim, Wine Lady—”

“Um, hang on. Who's Wine Lady?”

The jab came from none other than Wine Lady herself. But I ignored her.

“As soon as the lights came on, we saw that the woman who was the victim of this crime was already covered in wine. Isn't that right, Wine Lady?”

“Um...listen, who is Wine Lady—?”

“Isn't that right? Wine Lady?”

“Uh...? Sure, yes...”

I forced my way forward.

But I didn't even need her to answer; it was so obvious from the state of the crime scene that Wine Lady had been covered in wine from the start. The spot where it happened was such a disaster that we had all mistaken the wine for a puddle of blood.

“Her body was so wet with wine that she had to temporarily change her clothes.”

That's why she's currently wearing clothes borrowed from the restaurant.

By the way...

“Given that fact, there's an extremely high possibility that the same damage

would have been done to our culprit as well.”

“Hmm?” The detective wheeled around to face me. The puppets on her hands were kissing. “Oh, sorry. What?”

You’re playing around in the middle of reasoning this out...

“I’m saying it’s strange that our culprit isn’t soaked in wine.”

“Oh? Uh, yeah. It...sure is?”

She nodded ambiguously.

So I take it you haven’t been listening to me from the start? Well, whatever.

Allow me to continue.

“But no matter how many interviews we conducted around the restaurant, there was no one who was soaked in wine. This is immediately clear if you’ll all just have a little look at one another. Not a single person here is covered in wine. Isn’t that right, Detective?”

“Yes, that’s true.” She and both her puppets nodded along with boastful expressions. “In other words, this case will remain unsolv—”

“Not at all. What are you talking about?”

Seriously, what are you saying?

I squinted at her and said, “It means the person who committed this crime probably concealed themselves immediately after getting covered in wine and only reentered the room later.”

There were no customers who had been missing since the lights came back on, and any missing staff would have been reasonably suspected. The culprit had to have snuck back inside the restaurant.

But their body would have been covered in wine. If they had come back in like that, everyone would have known they were the culprit.

In which case...

“I believe our culprit is probably someone who fled to another part of the restaurant immediately after they touched Wine Lady’s chest—specifically, they escaped to the area near the restrooms. Isn’t that right, Detective?”

“Huh?” The detective had a look of blank amazement on her face.

I walked slowly but steadily toward her.

“And I believe that in order to cast suspicion away from themselves, our culprit probably pretended to do some detective work to try to fool the rest of us. Isn’t that right, Detective?”

“...Huh?”

“And in pretending to investigate the crime to a certain extent, the culprit probably planned to say something like, ‘It seems like this case will remain unsolved’ and then make their escape. Isn’t that right, Detective?”

“...Um?”

“But I think that no matter how hard they pretended to investigate, and no matter how they tried to fool us, once the culprit was soaked in wine, the scent clung to their body. Isn’t that right, Detective?”

“...Sidekick?”

“Detective. By the way...”

Then I brought my face close to the nape of the detective’s neck and took a deep breath in and out.

I stared at her with a wide grin.

I had wondered about her from the start.

“Smells like foul play...”

I detected a scent on her that could not possibly be covered up.

The smell of foul play.

Or rather, the smell of red wine.

Sure enough, the scent I picked up from the detective was *the same scent* that surrounded Wine Lady.



Considering that the real reason she’d taken it upon herself to play detective was so that she could muddy the waters around her own crime, it made sense

that despite her appearance, the Puppet Detective hadn't offered a single deduction.

My line of reasoning was apparently in large part correct, because before too long, the detective made a confession.

"Normally, I do make my living doing detective work, but..."

She had a very, very faraway look in her eyes.

"But recently, I've been feeling a little frustrated..."

She confessed that much and then let herself be persuaded by the owner to be taken into the back of the restaurant.

"F-frustrated... Unbelievable..."

Wine Lady, the victim, on the other hand, stared at her attacker and for some reason let out a yearning sigh as her cheeks flushed crimson.

I heard the rest of this after the fact, but apparently the detective kept saying nonsensical things like "It wasn't that I wanted to touch your boobs. I just wanted to kiss you a little bit" and "Whenever I see cute girls, I just...you know..." She put the restaurant owner in a particularly tight spot.

I was stunned by what had happened, and my right hand let out an exasperated sigh. "That was really a terrible incident, wasn't it?" asked the falsetto voice.

That was how the spectacle in the three-star restaurant came to a close—with misconduct on the part of the detective herself.

By the way, once the incident was over, I used a spell to revert the stains that clung to the carpet and to Wine Lady's clothes.

The owner of the restaurant had told me he wanted to settle the matter quietly, and it was easy for me to fix things with magic, so doing so was no problem.

But the owner couldn't forget that the crime the detective committed had resulted in a lot of trouble for his restaurant. No matter how badly he might have wanted to settle things quietly, there was no way he could let her go without punishment.

Apparently, the detective was firmly scolded by the owner of the restaurant in a separate room, then ordered to pay a moderate nuisance fee.

But unfortunately, she didn't have the funds to cover it.

So what happened as a result was...

"My apologies for the wait. Here is your after-dinner tea..."

...she ended up working at the restaurant for a little while.

Dressed in uniform, the detective set a cup of black tea down on my table and bowed deeply.

"T-take your time and enjoy..."

She was serving customers with a very, very bitter look on her face.

Out of concern, allow me to offer you one bit of advice.

"You ought to smile a little more when you're taking care of customers, you know."

"So I've been told, but...I don't really have what it takes for manual labor..." The detective sighed heavily. "And I feel a certain someone constantly staring at me..." She was looking a little pale.

I took a quick look behind her and realized that Wine Lady was looking in our direction from a distant table.

Apparently, the detective had been working in the restaurant every day since the incident to pay off her debt, and according to what she said, Wine Lady had been showing up day after day.

"I think she likes you."

"Yeah, but she's laying it on a little thick, and I don't know what to do..."

"You got what you wanted. Isn't that wonderful?" a falsetto voice chimed in.

My goodness, listen to what my right hand is saying! That's a pretty spiteful tone she's taking.

"I like to pursue, not *be* pursued. I'm a detective, after all."

"Detectives don't grope people's chests in the dark."

“I wasn’t trying to touch her boobs. I just wanted to kiss her!”

“...Either way, you’re a real creep, you know that?”

As for what happened after that, the detective told me that Wine Lady’s fervent pining continued daily, and it was way more exhausting than the work she was doing to repay her debt.

My, what a luxurious problem to have.

“Well, surely it’s not that bad—not if you think of it as gaining one more crazy fan.”

“But I’d rather gain fans through my detective work...”

“You’re only in this predicament because you surrendered to your desires and committed a crime in the dark.”

“Uuugh...,” she sighed and lamented, “Why the heck do these things happen to me...?”

Don’t ask me.

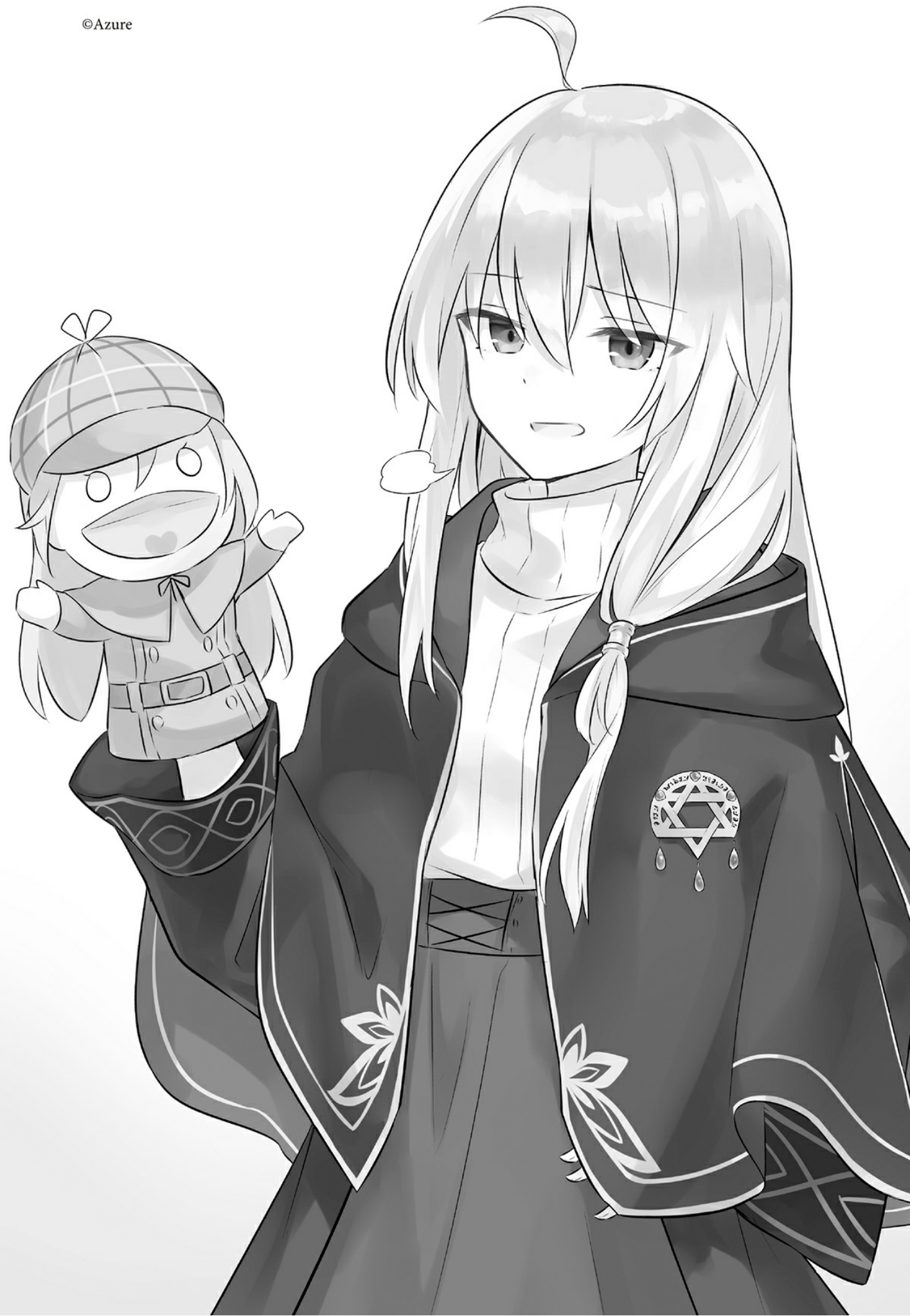
The detective herself had invited all of this with her actions. There was no more to be said.

So I looked up at the detective from my seat, as I enjoyed my after-dinner tea, and I raised my right hand.

“Oh my! There’s no helping it, you know,” it said in falsetto. “They say that birds of a feather flock together.”

I heard this after the fact, but apparently the Puppet Detective went on to take first place in the Creepy Idols with Equally Creepy Fans rankings.

Birds of a feather, truly.





CHAPTER 2

Attention and Praise

A certain theater show had gained popularity in a city I'd visited by chance.

THE TWELFTH PUBLIC PERFORMANCE BY THE CREN THEATRICAL COMPANY

Posters bearing these words were plastered all over the city's weathered brick buildings.

The small sheets of paper showed a lone man standing up on a platform, with several women dancing behind him. It looked like an opera.

The performers seemed to be quite spirited in their publicity efforts. I even caught sight of some of them handing out flyers in the town plaza.

"We're holding our twelfth public performance as planned tomorrow and the next day!" one of them said as we passed each other.

I accepted the flyer that was pressed into my hand.

"....."

The line for the ticket cost had been scratched out and revised in handwriting to show a price three times the original. It looked like they had planned four nights of performances, beginning the previous evening and continuing on until the day after next. The word CANCELED was written over the line for that day. And for some strange reason, the price of the two remaining performances had tripled in price. What's more, the words THANK YOU FOR MAKING US SO POPULAR! were also written on the flyer.

Oh-hoh, seems this show has attracted quite a bit of attention. Probably because they're advertising it everywhere. This Cren Theatrical Company is the talk of the town.

The name of the company was fluttering about all over the place.

"Hey, get this, it sounds like they're doing a public performance tomorrow."

"But you can't get tickets anymore with how the price has gone up, can you? Must be nice for those who bought them ahead of time."

“I saw the show yesterday, you know...”

“I heard a rumor that tickets for tomorrow’s performance are nearly sold out.”

“And today’s show got canceled...”

More and more people continued to gather. I guessed this was how the show’s popularity had spread throughout town. They say it’s human nature for people to congregate together.

Similarly, I was one of those people, so before I knew it, I was speaking to the townsfolk.

“Um, excuse me—is that performance really all that interesting?” I asked.

The responses from the townspeople were all identical. Each of them said basically the same thing. There was a good reason for the large crowd.

The people of that town could not stop talking about the Cren Theatrical Company.

Incredibly, I even saw the topic of the Cren Theatrical Company mentioned in the newspaper.

LEADER OF CREN THEATRICAL COMPANY FORCES THROUGH REMAINING TWO DAYS OF SCHEDULED PUBLIC PERFORMANCE, EVADING EXPLANATION OF AFFAIR WITH LEAD ACTRESS, it said.

No doubt that was the actual reason drawing people to the Cren Theatrical Company.



After strolling around town for a little while, I made my way to see the leader of the Cren Theatrical Company.

Of course, I had arranged a meeting ahead of time. There was no way I would have been able to just drop in on the leader of the theater troupe. He was the one I had come to the city to see.

“Here is the article the merchant entrusted me with the other day.”

His house was a fairly extravagant one and sat on the broad main avenue of the city. When I had knocked on the door and called out simply, “Delivery!” he had ushered me inside.

“Great, I’ve been waiting for you! I’m sorry for forcing you to hurry.”

As a traveling mage, I am sometimes commissioned to carry packages with me on my journeys. In this case, the delivery was the whole reason I had come to this city. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that I had come from afar just to hand over this package.

“Don’t mention it.”

And just a moment earlier, that job had come to an end.

I had handed over the package in exchange for a small sum of money.

As he cracked the lid on the wooden box and checked the contents, the man told me in good humor, “Right now, keeping these is quite popular around here, among those in the know.”

I looked at the wooden box.

“...These are popular?”

“Apparently, they’re slick and smooth and pleasant to the touch. They’re especially popular with young girls, I hear.”

Inside the box, a curious gelatinous creature was jiggling around.

“...This is a slime. You know that, right?”

“They’re all the rage around here.”

I’m not all that knowledgeable about the creatures known as slimes, but in neighboring countries, these creatures were considered pests, and I’d heard that many places worked actively to exterminate them. In particular, many people found the slimes’ astonishing fecundity and gelatinous jiggling nature viscerally disgusting, and I’d heard that they were despised elsewhere, especially by young women.

There must be a lot of strange girls around here...

But bringing it back to Cren.

“Seems like you’ve been having all sorts of trouble, huh?” I couldn’t help but bring up the subject. “People are gossiping about your affair in town, you know?”

“Oh, you know about that, Miss Witch?” He was a hot topic throughout the town, but he didn’t look like he was especially worried about it. “I guess they are talking. I’m not all that worried about what the masses have to say, but today’s performance did get canceled because of an issue with the affair.”

“I saw that.”

It had been easy to guess what was going on from the townspeople and the newspaper headlines.

Apparently, Cren had had a wife before forming his theater troupe, but recently it had come to light that he was having a secret affair with a young actress who had just joined his troupe. As soon as the affair had been discovered, his wife had moved out and served him with divorce papers. The speed with which everything had happened—and the fact that even under such circumstances, Cren had forced through performances starring an actress with basically no credentials because she was his lover—had attracted people’s attention, in a bad way.

“But tomorrow and the next day, the performances are going ahead as planned, aren’t they?”

“Mm-hmm. We finally have eyes on us, so we can’t *not* perform.”

I think the people involved in the production are attracting more attention than the play itself, though...

“Oh, that’s right!” Then Cren clapped his hands and pulled a small slip of paper out of his pocket.

“A ticket for tomorrow. If you’re interested, please come watch the show.”

Well, now.

“Can I really have this?”

I’m probably just gonna scalp it, y’know...

Cren nodded.

“You got me what I needed in order to seduce actresses. It’s only right to give you this as thanks,” he said.

.....

Um...?

“What are you talking about?”

Aren't you already lovers with your lead actress? What is this? Are you planning to make a pass at another new actress at this point? Are you trying to get with every woman in your company?

In an instant, suspicious thoughts were swirling around in my head.

But his answer was completely different from anything I was imagining.

“Ha-ha-ha! Don't tell anyone, but as a matter of fact, I hired that actress from abroad. I brought her here specifically for this performance!” he told me.

According to Cren, the theater company he managed had been in a slump for a long time. In recent years, they had hardly drawn any customers. Though they had put on twelve public performances, the people in that city had stopped coming to see them entirely.

When they had held their first performance, a long waiting list to join the theater troupe had formed, and other troupes had even started up in imitation. But now they were a mere shadow of their former glory. Popularity and trends were like living creatures, always moving on to the next thing.

The Cren Theatrical Company was entirely a thing of the past.

And so after their twelfth performance, the Cren Theatrical Company was going to leave.

“This will be our last show. We want to start over fresh in a new place,” Cren said. “But since we're going to the trouble of putting on a final performance, it would be a waste not to make as much money as we can off it, right?”

That was why they had to pull in a lot of customers.

But...

“We figured we probably wouldn't get our former customer traffic back just by honest advertising. I'm convinced that the people of this city are already tired of watching the same old theater troupe and that they're unlikely to show

up, no matter how innovative or new the production.”

What the troupe members had come up with was the unusual method of hiring an actress from abroad. But...

“What’s the point of working with an actress you hired from somewhere else?”

It was a naive question. I wasn’t sure how popular the actress they hired was where she came from, but it seemed like she would be unknown, at least around there.

How is that supposed to create publicity?

“She’s perfect precisely because she’s unknown. We’re not using her to draw in customers, we’re using her to attract attention.”

“.....?”

He explained it to me a little bit too politely, since I was slow to understand.

According to Cren...

“To be honest, the rumor that I’m having an affair with that actress is nothing more than a baseless rumor. I should know. I spread it myself. The truth is that I have no relationship whatsoever with her. In truth, she’s a woman of absolute integrity—I’m simply having her perform, both on stage and as part of the publicity stunt.”

“.....”

Hmm?

“And I’m not leaving my wife. Though we did have to get legally divorced in this country.”

Hmmm?

“...So to make a long story short, this is all an elaborate lie... Is that what you’re saying?”

He nodded. “That’s right.”

I was starting to see the whole picture.

To clearly and concisely summarize this whole sequence of events...

The leader of the Cren Theatrical Company, which was facing a real slump, in order to make as much money as possible off of their final performance before leaving the city, had gone out of his way to draw attention to something that had nothing to do with the show and win back their popularity and success. That seemed to be what I was hearing.

“Actually, everything went as planned. Even though we’ve raised the ticket prices three times now, there’s an endless line of people waiting to buy them. It makes me regret not raising the prices even more.”

“.....”

Needless to say, based on what I had seen, every person in the city was talking about the play at the moment.

Their theatrical production was the talk of the town.

But...

“Should you really be telling me all this?”

After all, how would the townspeople feel if they learned the truth about the Cren Theatrical Company, which was continuing to attract so much attention?

“I’m telling you precisely because I *want* you to spread the word.”

Ultimately, even if I alluded to what was going on with the theater company, that would just be like pouring oil on the fire and would probably lead to an even sharper rise in prices for tickets to his show. Admiration, curiosity, or disgust—in the end, they all brought in the same money. So long as I didn’t stay quiet about what kind of person Cren was, no matter what action I did take, ultimately the people’s money would end up in his pocket.

Ha-ha, he really thought this through.

“Every bit of controversy surrounding this public performance is fake. The actress is fake, and my relationship with her is a lie. My divorce from my wife is also a lie. But every bit of it was made up in order to get as many people as possible to come see the play. I’m really giving this production my all, and I’m quite confident in its substance. Please, by all means, you must come see it

tomorrow.”

“...I’ll think about it.”

But then again, I doubt I’ll be able to concentrate on the substance of the play after hearing all this.

“I especially want you to know that the talent of the woman we hired for the main role is the real deal. I’m utterly charmed by her—so much so that I arranged for something like this,” Cren said, patting the slime he held in his hands.

“.....”

But you said you weren’t having an affair with her. The truth often comes out of a lie.

At least, it seemed to me that the man before me holding a slime was interested in the target of his affection not as an actor but as a woman.

Oh no, I wonder how that’s going to turn out?

Perhaps she has strange enough tastes to be genuinely pleased when he hands her that despicable creature?



The following evening, I was walking toward the gates to the city.

I had more or less finished sightseeing, and my errand was taken care of, and while I was at it I had even seen a play. And so you could say I had no further business there.

“The final day of our twelfth public performance is going on as planned!”

As before, members of the Cren Theatrical Company were handing out flyers along the main avenue, swarming the merchants and travelers who had just entered the city.

The streets were as noisy as always, and when I looked at a flyer, I saw that the price of a ticket had leaped up five times over. They were overcharging terribly for the last of the last shows, but perhaps because they had gathered so much attention, sure enough, there seemed to be no shortage of people looking to buy.

Voices shouting, “We’re nearly sold out!” flitted past me.

At a glance, it seemed like the theater company was extraordinarily popular.

“This thing is really popular...”

“It sure is... I wonder if it’s really that interesting?”

Just before I left the city, a pair of travelers who had just passed through the gate walked past me, looking at the scene before their eyes.

Shortly, they called out to me.

“Um, say, excuse me. Are you a traveler?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “I was just leaving.”

“I see... By the way, have you seen that play?”

Then the traveler pointed to one of the posters for the Cren Theatrical Company’s twelfth public performance.

Well, that goes without saying.

“Yes I have.”

“Is it really all that interesting?”

“.....”

At that point, I remembered something.

Come to think of it, I asked a similar question just as I entered the city. I was just as intrigued by the theater company.

I remember clearly how the townsfolk answered me then. And I suppose I could say I hold just the same impression as them, now that I’ve seen the play.

In which case...

I suppose it would be appropriate to repeat the words so many people said to me back then, just as I heard them the other day.

If I’m not mistaken, their words went something like this.

They said...

“I don’t really remember.”



CHAPTER 3

Just a Story About People Who Want to Eat Some Tasty Meat

“Good day. I am a merchant.”

A lone merchant arrived before the gate of a certain city.

The gate guard looked the merchant over and greeted her after a perfunctory bow. “Ah, welcome to the Land of Greenery and Harmony.” But his eyes looked a little suspicious of her.

The young woman who had introduced herself as a merchant was dressed in a black robe and a black pointed hat. She was obviously a mage and wore a star-shaped brooch upon her breast. In short, she was a witch.

As far as the guard could remember, it was the first time someone who was a witch and also a merchant had visited the city. Thinking it was a strange turn of events, the guard started the usual immigration procedures.

“What is the purpose of your visit today?”

“Transporting a package, of course. I am a merchant, after all.” The witch patted the parcel that was tied to the end of her broom, insisting again for some reason that she was a merchant.

“I see, a package... What’s inside?”

“Some freshly harvested vegetables. They’re fresh.”

“Oh really, vegetables? That’s wonderful! What kind?”

“Huh? Um...just a minute, please.” The witch pulled a slip of paper out from her breast pocket. “Uh, it’s lettuce.”

“Lettuce, is it?! I have heard the flavor of fresh lettuce from one of the neighboring lands has quite the reputation!” The guard’s voice grew lively as soon as the talk turned to vegetables.

“Apparently so.”

“So then, may I be allowed to inspect the package?” Then the gate guard took

one step toward the merchant.

But she stubbornly refused this request.

“It will reduce their freshness, so please do not,” she said somewhat stiffly while looking at the slip of paper.

She was extremely suspicious.

“I see! I suppose that’s true. Excuse me for asking. Please pass on through.”

But the guard was struck with a sense of duty to allow the fresh heads of lettuce to be delivered quickly and let her pass as she was. That guard’s shortcoming was being extremely lax in judgment when it came to vegetables.

Ultimately, the witch-turned-merchant made it into the city without any issue.

“Oh, by the way, Miss Merchant?”

Just as she was passing through the gate, the guard called out to her.

She jumped, startled, and turned around, obviously on her guard. “Huh? Wh-wh-wh-what is it?” she asked in a shrill voice. By that time, it was clear that she was feeling guilty about something, but the guard did not seem to notice how she was acting.

“Sorry. I forgot to ask your name,” he said.

Ah, right, of course.

By the way, who on earth could that merchant have been?

“Elaina.”

That’s right, it’s me.

How do you do? My name is Algram. I live in the Land of Greenery and Harmony. Actually, there’s a request I would like to make of an honest merchant like yourself, and I wonder if you would be kind enough to hear me out?

When you are a witch wandering from place to place, sometimes you are asked to transport packages. In fact, just the other day, as I was transporting a slime, I accepted a merchant’s request for me to transport a number of other packages.

At the moment, I was handling one of those jobs.

Apparently, it was a bit of an unusual job, because the merchant and the customer had corresponded several times by letter.

Now I had those numerous letters in hand.

The more I looked at them, the stranger the request seemed.

I want to have you secretly smuggle meat into my city.

And it seemed to be quite a strange place.

At present, eating meat is prohibited in the Land of Greenery and Harmony. Previously, though the price was high, there were ways to acquire meat, but recently the regulations have gotten stricter, and even the sale of meat is now prohibited here. I have no means of acquiring meat anymore.

I had gotten a sense of the situation in the Land of Greenery and Harmony from the exchanges in the letters, but sure enough, when I really walked around and had a look, I didn't see any restaurants on the streets that looked like they served meat. Filling my field of vision to capacity were slogans I didn't really understand, like EATING VEGETABLES IS GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH and EAT VEGETABLES AND HAVE A BEAUTIFUL LIFE as well as words like ORGANIC and HEALTHY.

What has happened to my homeland?!

In his letters, Algram was indignant.

When I was young, we could eat meat freely. But in today's world, people look at you with disgust if you so much as request it. Undoubtedly, the children who are raised being taught that meat is evil will only make meat harder to find here. It's so sad...

There was a torrent of eloquent writing, but in short, he wanted to eat meat, so he wanted me to smuggle it in.

When you first enter the city, there will likely be an inspection of belongings. But if you tell them you are transporting fresh lettuce, they may let you pass. In the event that the guard asks you to show them what's inside the package, you shouldn't have any trouble as long as you say, "It will reduce their freshness, so please do not!"

According to the letter, there were many people there who loved vegetables to an excessive degree, and for the most part as long as I said something along those lines, I would be able to get in without any issues. And I had. I was developing a bit of a headache.

I'd like you to be precise about the date when you deliver the meat to me. There are things I must prepare to align with the timing of your delivery.

Together with these instructions in the final letter was enclosed a map leading to Algram's house.

It was currently the appointed date and time, according to the merchant who had entrusted this job to me, which probably meant this Algram person was waiting eagerly at home for his meat to show up.

And so, carefully examining the map, I set off to deliver the fresh meat to his place.

Well then, I look forward to the arrival of my esteemed courier, concluded the letter.

By the way...

I had made it to what appeared to be the location of Algram's house on the map, but...

"....."

I stood motionless before the front gate.

It looked like a reasonably nice two-story house. It probably belonged to a family that wasn't quite wealthy but still led a fairly comfortable lifestyle. The entire lawn was covered in grass and was spacious enough that the people who lived there could enjoy, for example, barbecues on the weekend. It was pretty.

"Here we go, Clery! Grilling meat slowly is the most delicious way. If we get the heat level wrong, our meat will turn into charcoal in an instant."

Actually, that's what they were doing right at that moment.

I could see two people standing around a barbecue grill in the yard. It looked like they had already started their barbecue, for smoke was rising up from the grill grate.

The one who had just been speaking looked to be a man in his twenties. His hair was red. He was tall and had an average build, but his voice alone had a very bombastic tone to it. Somehow, that man seemed likely to be Algram.

“But, big brother...”

Across from the man I was assuming was Algram, looking up at him timidly, was Clery—the boy who had been called by that name. He looked to be about ten years old. Clery had red hair just like the man who appeared to be Algram. He had a slim build and pale skin and somehow gave off the impression of being frail.

I could tell from their conversation that the two of them were brothers.

Looking up questioningly at his older brother, then staring at the smoke rising from the grill, Clery grumbled, “That is just an ordinary tree branch, though...?”

Right after he said that, flames rose above the grill grate.

“That’s right, it’s a tree branch!” Algram said enthusiastically, gazing at the flames that danced above the grate. “Are you ready, Clery? We’re going to grill some meat. But I wonder how it’ll go? Don’t you think we ought to do a practice run with everything?”

“I don’t think a tree branch counts as practice...”

“Sure it does! This counts! Close your eyes now, Clery!”

“...? Okay.”

“...Can’t you just see the meat dancing on top of the grill?”

“.....”

“How is it?”

“Smoky.”

“It’s not smoky!”

They’re visualizing it...

I have to wonder why they started their barbecue when their meat hadn’t even been delivered yet. But now I see that they are grilling a tree branch on top of the grate for practice.

.....

I wasn't really sure why, but a tear came to my eye.

Must be the smoke.



"We've been waiting for you, my esteemed merchant! My name is Algram. The seeker of the meat!"

It was the red-haired older brother who offered this strange self-introduction the moment I knocked at the gate. Apparently, he was Algram, just as I had surmised.

"And this is Clery! My darling brother!"

Clery, who had been called Algram's "darling brother," looked up at me as he clung to his older brother and nodded once in greeting. "H-hello..."

He seemed skittish for some reason.

"Yes, hello."

So I returned his greeting with the best smile I could muster, but— "....."

Clery hid himself timidly behind his big brother.

"Ha-ha-ha! Sorry about him. My brother is a little shy around strangers." Algram placed a hand down on his little brother's head. "Anyway, Miss Merchant, have you brought the you-know-what?"

The man with the bombastic way of talking held his hands out toward me.

You've misunderstood one thing.

"I'm not a merchant. I'm a traveling witch. The merchant asked me to transport this in his stead." I placed the package full of meat in Algram's hands as I corrected him. "Here are the items you ordered."

The heavy parcel was taken from my hands.

"Oh...ohhhhhh!" Algram was extraordinarily excited. He lifted the package of meat into the air. "I've been waiting for you! I've waited so long for this moment!" He was very excited. Maybe a little too excited...

“If I remember correctly, you said you can’t buy meat in this city, right?”

That’s what you wrote in your letters, after all.

“Right! Recently, the vegetarians have been throwing their weight around here. Now people like me have been driven into a corner and oppressed, and every day is miserable.”

“.....”

I looked at my surroundings.

A detached house. A spacious yard. A smoking barbecue grill. Two brothers dressed in fairly high-quality clothes.

...Looks to me like you’re living a pretty rich life, though.

“What do your parents do?”

“.....”

He answered my question with silence.

He slowly lowered his hands and the meat cradled within them. Then he hung his head and replied in a subdued voice, “...This city started changing in a major way eight years ago. One of the policies set forth by Galan, our current leader, was a plan to turn everyone vegetarian. A dreadful plan to slowly, over a long period of time, deprive all the citizens of meat by the end of this year.”

According to Algram, there had always been a lot of people who loved vegetables, so there were many voices that praised the policy set out by that Galan person. On the other hand, the voices of people like Algram, who liked meat, were silenced. And before they knew it, they had been backed into a corner.

“My mother used to be a sensible woman who worked for the city. She was more opposed than anyone to Galan’s overbearing policy.” His voice started to tremble. “...But now our mother is...”

I knew I had asked about something that I probably shouldn’t have.

“And our father left when we were small. I’m the only one around who can feed Clery meat.”

If the ban on meat had been enacted eight years earlier, then surely Clery had never properly eaten meat.

“...Meat.”

Clery was standing there with his gaze fixed on the parcel.

“Come on, Clery! The time has come to make use of the skills you learned in training! Let’s grill some meat! As slowly as you can, now!” Algram proclaimed loudly. “Thank you, Lady Witch!”

Then he bowed once to me, turned suddenly, and walked toward his smoking barbecue.

But is this really all right?

If Algram’s story is true, then it seems like it might not be so good to eat meat around here.

Won’t it cause offense if he grills meat openly in his yard like this, despite the law?

Though I feel like at least the neighbors already know about the fact that Algram and his brother eat meat...

I was watching Algram’s and Clery’s backs, my head cocked to the side in slight skepticism, when it happened.

“You bastaaards! What do you think you’re doing, in a place like this?!”

Sure enough, almost as if it was planned—

There were many soldiers near their house.

.....

Totally busted.



Since I was the person responsible for getting the meat to the brothers, I couldn’t just run away with a flippant, “All right then, I’ll be going now!” Ultimately, I also ended up face-to-face with lots of soldiers, right alongside them.

The soldiers pointed their spears at all of us and chattered loudly.

“Gah...! What’s that stench?!”

“It’s meat! These people were about to eat meat!”

“Imagine, eating the flesh of a living creature! Unbelievable!”

“Isn’t it kind of smoky?”

I see, so I guess the story about meat being banned here was true.

Before we knew it, not only the soldiers but the neighbors, too, were watching us from a distance, whispering to one another.

One of the soldiers, probably the one responsible for the area—for convenience sake, let’s call him the head soldier—glared at Algram, who was holding the package of meat, and raised his voice.

“How dare you! What are you thinking, starting a barbecue like this in the middle of the day?! Extinguish it at once!”

But Algram immediately refused.

“Not a chance! If you want to know the reason why, it’s because I’ve got meat here, and my dear brother who wants it!”

He completely missed the point of what they were saying. He wasn’t even close.

“B-big brother...” Clery, who had panicked when they were suddenly surrounded, was clinging to his brother even more tightly than before.

“There’s nothing to worry about, Clery. We haven’t done a single thing wrong. We are just exercising our rights as living creatures.”

“It is our duty to protect the rights of animals.” The head soldier took one step toward Algram. “We became vegetarians in order to give freedom to animals, who live as livestock and are killed for food. Hand over that package!”

“No!”

“Don’t you people feel bad for the animals that were killed?!”

“Oh, so I suppose you all went around asking the livestock how they felt? Did they tell you it felt futile to live and die as livestock? And did you ask the vegetables? Did they tell you they don’t mind having their roots harvested and

their fruits plucked off? That it's no problem for them to die miserable deaths? Did you beg *their* forgiveness?"

"Vegetables don't feel pain!"

"I don't want to hear about rights from someone who won't even try to hear the voices of the voiceless!"

Are we still talking about meat...?

I immediately backed away from the two men and their impassioned argument. It seemed likely that the meat I had taken so much trouble to transport would be damaged if things continued as they were. I had nothing better to do, so for the time being, I quickly recovered the parcel of meat from Algram's hands.

Then I took out my wand and cast a spell, causing cool and chilly air to pour out over the meat.

"Whoa, amazing!"

Maybe the enthusiasm of his older brother, who was arguing back and forth with the soldier, was catching on. Following the cool air, Clery was drawn to my wand and trotted over to me.

"Isn't it? Isn't it amazing?" I hit Clery with the chilly air.

"It's cold..." Clery's soft hair fluttered, and a smile formed on his young face. "Miss, are you a mage?"

"I sure am!" boasted the witch to the ten-year-old child.

That's me.

"Amazing!"

The innocent young boy's round, cute eyes glistened and sparkled.

So shiny...

I had plenty of time on my hands, plus I felt flattered by my young admirer, so I said, "I can do stuff like this, too," and I left the package of meat behind and waved my wand. I performed tricks like conjuring a little snowman and tying the boy's hair up with grass. I also formed pillars of ice around the package of meat.

It turned out to be an effective way to kill some time.

“Hand it over!”

“I refuse!”

“Give it here!”

“No, I said!”

But the head soldier and Algram were just getting overheated, and the situation didn't seem likely to resolve itself.

“...Has your older brother always been like this?” I whispered the question to Clery while we were playing.

Clery nodded. “He becomes like a different person when meat is involved...”

“Hmm? Does that mean you didn't actually want to eat it?”

But I thought he was trying his best for the sake of his younger brother, who wanted to eat meat.

“I don't really care either way.”

“I see.”

You're incredibly practical, in your own way.

It seems like these brothers are kind of complete opposites when it comes to personality...

“I want to eat meat! Why can't you understand that?!”

The older brother is the one who seems to be an extremely passionate person, though. Huh, I wonder just what kind of household they were raised in, to produce such a funny pair of brothers?

“Oh dear, what are all these people doing gathered here at this time of day?”

At just about that time, a single woman appeared from the two brothers' house. She was a tall and slender adult woman with an air of composure about her. She looked to be in her thirties or forties.

Oh, who's this?

“Mother!” Algram called out to the woman.

.....*Huh?*

“She’s alive?”

“I never said anything about her being dead.”

“Well, it sort of came off that way, so...”

And here I was sure that your mother had passed away, your father had left you long ago, and you were the noble older brother, living life while protecting your young sibling.

“The mother we once had is no more...”

Algram suddenly turned serious. But beside him, his mother was tugging at his sleeve, asking her son, “Did something happen? Hey, talk to me,” and it kind of spoiled the mood.

“She used to be a wonderful woman who ate meat frequently, but now the only thing lining her table is vegetables... And to make matters worse, she recently started using terms I don’t understand, like *pesticide-free* and *organic*...”

“Today’s lunch is pesticide-free cabbage rolls!” his mother interjected at once from beside him with one of those difficult new terms.

“I want you to go back to being the plump woman I used to know... I...”

“By the way, the cabbage rolls are filled with more cabbage!”

So...you just made stewed cabbage?

But if this guy likes plump women...

“So to make a long story short, you like thick women?”

“Yes. Bigger, even. Ideally, my future partner would be around twice my weight.”

“You’d be better off looking somewhere else, then.”

“I knew it.”

“By the way, where did your father go off to?”

“He’s just on a business trip.”

“.....”

So they're a completely normal family...

“Oh-hoh-hoh. By the way, what on earth is going on with these soldiers?”

Apparently, the story about Algram's mother working for the government was true.

Their mother walked over to the soldiers and exchanged a few words with them. “I'll tell my son,” she said before simply sending the soldiers on their way.

Then she turned around abruptly.

“Take it easy with the fooling around, okay?”

She bonked Algram on the forehead with her fist.

“All right then, I'm off to buy some cabbage!”

As soon as their mother had skillfully settled the disturbance, she headed off immediately to do her early afternoon shopping.

“My mother really ought to want meat, too...” Algram's head drooped as he watched his mother depart. “Eight years ago, when Galan won the election against my mother, he imposed a strict ban on meat throughout the land. My mother opposed it to the last, but at that time, public opinion was already with Galan. My mother had no choice but to surrender.”

“I see...”

So that's what happened...

“In order to clear away my mother's regrets, I must grill meat.”

“Wait, I don't really understand that logic...”

I don't get what you mean...

Then, with extremely theatrical movements, he whirled around to face us and said, “All right, Clery! Let's grill some meat! Our long-awaited meat is finally here!”

“But, big brother... If we eat meat, we won't have room for the cabbage rolls...”

“Clery! What are you saying?!” Algram grabbed his little brother by the shoulders. “There’s always room for meat!”

“Uhhh...”

“Now, repeat after me! There’s always room for meat!”

“Th-there’s always room for...”

“Louder! There’s always room for meat!”

“There’s always room for meat!”

“Good!”

Wait, surely there isn’t always room for meat.

Well, anyway, a lot of things have happened in a short amount of time, but I did finish my job, so it’s about time for me to go.

Algram’s been going on and on about meat, and it’s made me want to eat some, too.

Maybe I’ll have some meat for dinner tonight.



“Ah, well then, I’ll just be...”

I was in a hurry to get out of there, so I went to hand over the package of meat to Algram again. I was about to pick up the package that I had just been blasting with cold air a few moments earlier, but...

“.....”

What’s this?

What in the world is going on?

There were pillars of ice standing desolately in the place where I had set the meat down, but there was no sign of the package itself.

“The meat is...”

It had vanished, as if in a puff of smoke.

“Unbelievable! Where on earth did my meat go?!”

Algram realized what had happened a moment after I did. But no matter how many times the two of us combed the area, the package of meat was nowhere to be found.

Just what is going on here?

As I was puzzling over the mysterious phenomenon, Clery tugged at the sleeve of my robe.

“Miss, do you think...?”

He pointed.

I saw footprints in the unseasonable snow, leading all the way to the gate. Apparently, someone had walked through the snow I had conjured, out through the gate, but— “...Ah!”

Then I understood.

Apparently, while Clery and I had been amusing ourselves, the soldiers must have snuck away with the meat. The meat probably would have been safe if I hadn’t taken my eyes off it.

.....

Huh?

So that means, when you get right down to it...

The fact that the meat is gone might possibly be...

“...My fault?”



Even I felt some responsibility for this turn of events.

I wasn't corrupt enough to hurry home, not when the meat I had transported had been mercilessly confiscated by soldiers due to my negligence. These two brothers were so devoted to their barbecue that they had risked danger to smuggle meat into a city where it had been banned for eight years.

And so—

“We must take action to recover the meat!”

—I figured there was nothing to do but totally go along with Algram's suggestion.

“We'll go to city hall now and recover the meat ourselves! There's nothing else we can do if we're going to eat meat!”

.....

Wait, that sounds like a pain.

“Shall I go buy you some new meat?”

“No, Madam Witch! I appreciate it, but I must decline your offer!”

“...Why?”

“Because we want to eat it *now*!”

“Right. I knew that.”

So anyway, we headed straight for city hall to get them to give the meat back.

But do you think we could just walk into the office, tell them to give the meat back, and expect them to obediently hand it over? No, no, of course not.

So we headed to city hall with a plan of sorts. According to Algram, he actually had three secret plans.

“I’d like to get your cooperation on the third plan. Would that be all right?”

“Sure, I don’t really mind, but...just curious, what kind of support can I give you?”

“Well, about that...” He mumbled out the details of his third secret plan.

“Uh...”

I hate it so much...

Nevertheless, in my position, I couldn’t go against him, so I decided to follow his lead. As I was hoping that, if I was lucky, we would never make it to the third secret plan, we arrived at city hall.

So then, let’s see these secret plans for whatever Algram has devised, in order.

First, plan number one.

“You city hall bastards! Give my meat back!”

Algram walked into the office, carrying himself in a theatrical way, and began shouting loudly in a sing-song voice, twirling around in a strange dance.

Ultimately, tactic number one was just to try asking.

And as for the end result...

“Who the hell are you?!”

“That’s the barbecue man from earlier!”

“We legally confiscated that meat! We’re not giving it back!”

...they surrounded us, of course.

“B-big brother...” Clery was frightened again.

“Never fear, Clery. This is how I expected it to go.” Algram plopped his hand down on his younger brother’s head, took one step toward the soldiers, and thrust his hand into the bag he had brought with him.

I guess this is his second secret plan.

“You bastards! Do you know what this is?”

In his hands were a kitchen knife and several vegetables. “If you come any

closer, these vegetables are gonna get it... Understand?"

Algram smacked the knife against the vegetables.

He taunted them, as if to say, *"You got that? Make one wrong move, and I'll cut up these vegetables! See?"*

In short, to Algram, the vegetables in his hand were just like human hostages.

.....

I was watching him from behind, thinking there was no way this was going to end well.

"B-big brother..." Even Clery, who had been clinging to Algram's side, put some distance between them. "My big brother is acting weird..." he remarked tersely.

"I think he's dead serious..."

Well then, let's take a look at the soldiers' reactions, shall we?

Faced with Algram's erratic and slightly crazy offense, the soldiers looked at one another and started making a fuss.

"Th-that guy's—! What is he planning to do with those veggies?!"

"Stop it! Those babies are innocent!"

"Calm down, Barbecue Man! We can work this out!"

.....

"Now the soldiers are acting weird..."

"I think they were probably weird to begin with."

Clery and I seemed to be the only ones in the room who were left out. The soldiers all panicked, and some of them had already begun to lay down their weapons and put their hands up.

What's this, now?

Could this mean there's no longer any need for me to take part?

Nothing would make me happier, but...

“What’s all this fuss?”

Just then, one soldier showed up late.

It was the head soldier, who had passionately debated the rights of animals with Algram earlier. When he saw Algram’s face, he glared at him with a stern expression.

“You...! You’re the Barbecue Man!”

I’ve been wondering about this this whole time, but what’s with this “Barbecue Man” nickname?

“Indeed! I am the Barbecue Man!”

And Algram himself doesn’t seem unhappy with it, huh? I see.

“What brings you to a place like this? Don’t tell me you’ve come to take the meat back...”

“Indeed I have!”

Algram puffed his chest out and glared seriously at the head soldier. “Now where did you put my meat?!”

“I just delivered it to Mister Galan.”

Mister Galan—the most distinguished person in the city, if I remember correctly.

“I went to tell him I’m going to investigate where that meat was brought in from and crack down even more strictly on its importation.”

“Wh-what did you say...?!” The moment he heard the name Galan, Algram’s hands started shaking.

His shaking seemed to indicate that it was a matter of great importance to him.

Seeing through to the true nature of Algram’s trembling, the lead soldier’s mouth spread into a nasty smile. “Heh-heh-heh...right about now, that bundle is being stripped of its layers, and every inch of it is being *thoroughly* explored...”

By which you mean...the package of meat is being opened?

“Gah...! How despicable!”

Sounds pretty normal to me, though.

“Let’s give up on that meat already. It’s a waste of time. Let’s go back home and eat cabbage rolls,” Clery said.

“How can we do that?!” Algram had arrived full of determination. He couldn’t back down at that stage. “I...I can’t leave until I get the meat back...! Outta my way! I’m going to Galan!”

“We refuse.”

“In that case, with my own hands, these vegetables—”

He placed the knife against the vegetables, but—

“Humph...can you really do such a thing?”

“.....!”

Algram was shaking, just a little. And the head soldier did not fail to notice that slight opening.

“Can you do it? Are you capable of wasting vegetables that were lovingly brought up under a farmer’s care...?”

“.....!”

The knife clattered to the floor, and Algram collapsed.

“I...can’t do it! I couldn’t do such a thing!”

.....

What did I just watch?

I guess we can consider the second secret plan, or whatever that was, a failure due to Algram’s own convictions.

Which means...

“Lady Witch! It’s time!”

Time for secret plan number three, huh? Well, I knew it was coming.

“...Are we seriously doing that?”

“Please.” Strong determination dwelled deep within him.

I can't back out at this point.

So fine, I guess.

“...I'm not responsible for whatever happens, got it?”

After first issuing that warning, I took my wand in hand and channeled magical energy into it.

And what I cast was a spell to imbue objects with life.

As soon as I did...

...life flowed into the vegetables in Algram's hands.

You already know where this is going.

Algram's third secret plan was, to put it simply, to make the people hear the vegetables' cries of agony firsthand.

By the way, Algram was, at that moment, holding a cucumber and a tomato.

“Madam...luring me, a cucumber, to a place like this while your husband is away... Do you understand what that means?”

“W-wait...I'm not ready yet...”

“Heh-heh-heh...you may say that, but just look at how ripe you are inside...”

“D-don't say that...”

Wait, these aren't cries of agony...

.....

“Miss, I can't hear.”

Considering the content of the vegetables' conversation, I had covered Clery's ears. I couldn't very well let him hear all that.

“You can hear the rest when you're a little more grown up, okay?”

“But, miss...”

“Yes?”

“Most of the adults aren't listening, either.”

When the cucumber and tomato interrupted the men's nonsensical conversation, there was pandemonium as far as the eye could see. Soldiers were holding their heads and screaming, "Waaaah!" Some of them lost their fighting spirit: "I can never eat a tomato again..." while others fell into a daze: "So cucumbers are male...?" Someone even discovered a new attraction: "Getting with someone else's tomato, huh...? Sounds fun..." There were a great variety of reactions, and they all made me worry for the future of the city.

Off to the side of this spectacle, Algram was holding the cucumber and tomato, and he seemed— "From this angle, you do look pretty plump..."

He was gazing at the tomato with some kind of suggestive look in his eye. He was ready to explore new territory.

"....."

I was at a total loss, while beside me, Clery looked somewhat dismayed as he repeated the line he had already used who knows how many times that day.

"B-big brother..."

That was how we got through to that Galan guy in order to recover the meat.

○

"In heeeeeeeeeeeere!"

The door opened along with Algram's shout.

On the top floor of the city hall building, in the room at the very end of the hall, was where Galan had his office. In the middle of the spacious room, one middle-aged man sat at a desk with a cross look on his face.

"...What is it? What do you want?"

He had a knife and fork in his hands.

He was in the middle of a meal.

"Humph, what an easygoing guy you are, eating at a time like this!" Algram stormed up to him wildly, furious. "We came to take back our freedom! I think we'll start by having you give us back our meat!"

"Meat...?" Galan looked up at Algram. He opened his eyes wide in shock. "You...! You're the Barbecue Man, the one who was having a barbecue this

afternoon!”

“Indeed!”

“I see.”

As he spoke, Galan set his knife and fork down on the desk and stood up.

He was a little bit taller than Algram, and his chiseled physique was discernible even through his clothes.

Galan looked down at him and said, “You can’t have it! There’s no way I would return something that defies our laws! I’ll be disposing of the meat myself!”

“I went to a lot of trouble to get that meat for my dearest brother!”

“Regardless of your intentions, I cannot allow it!”

“Why? Why is it banned?! What is so bad about meat?!”

“How can you not understand this?! We are dedicated to protecting animals, even if it means resisting our appetites!”

“Everyone else is putting up with it, so I have to bear it, too? There’s no meaning to a life in which you’re constantly stifling your own desires!”

“Why don’t you try to bear it just like everyone else?!”

“Don’t force it on me! Ideas like that aren’t things you force, they’re things you share!”

I felt as if they must have been exchanging some fairly heated words, but I couldn’t forget the fact that this whole argument was over some meat, or that Algram had been giving a tomato amorous looks just a moment earlier.

“Tch...seems like I won’t get anywhere by talking to you...,” Algram spit in a hoarse voice.

Then for some reason, he began taking his shirt off, right then and there.

What’s the matter? Are you hot?

“Looks like there’s nothing to do but talk it out with our fists...”

.....

Why?

“Heh...just like old times. I was like that when I was young, too.”

Indifferent to me, standing there dumbfounded, and to Clery, who was calling out for his brother in confusion, Galan also began taking off his shirt, right then and there. In order to protect the young boy’s naïveté, I covered Clery’s eyes.

“Miss, I can’t see.”

“You can see the rest when you’re a little more grown up, okay?”

Right in front of us, as we exchanged these peaceful words, the men had already tossed their shirts aside and were glaring at each other half-naked.

The mature Galan, who had a sturdy, muscular body despite his years, taunted, “All right, come on then, boy.”

And Algram, who was slim but well-built, answered, “I’m no boy.”

Then he stepped forward and raised his voice.

“My name is Barbecue Man!” he declared.

Then the two men clashed.

Neither man held back; they simply unleashed their clenched fists along with beastly roars. Algram’s punch caved in Galan’s right cheek as Galan’s fist caved in Algram’s left cheek. That was how their furious fistfight began.

Fierce sounds reverberated through the office.

“Miss, what’s that sound?”

“That’s the sound of meat hitting meat.”

“Are they throwing meat around? Is it a meat party?”

“No, it’s a vision of hell.”

Judging from appearances, Galan seemed to have the upper hand in their fight, if only slightly. He was probably pretty well trained. No matter how many times Algram’s fists hit him, he didn’t budge. It was like his body was plated with steel.

Algram, on the other hand—

“Ga-hah!”

He got hit.

“Gu-wah!”

And he got kicked.

“Go-haaaaaah!”

And he took an openhanded smack, then collapsed beside me.

.....

“What’s wrong? Is that all you got?”

After just a few exchanges of blows, Algram was already wounded all over. Galan looked down at him and shrugged, as if he was already bored.

“It-it’s not over yet...!”

But Barbecue Man, or rather, Algram, stood up. He wouldn’t permit himself to retreat until he had the meat in his hands.

By the way, I feel like we might get mixed up in this if we stay here.

“How about we move back a little?”

Still covering Clery’s eyes, I moved hurriedly past the two men exchanging blows. I guided Clery, who was being dragged away without a clue, toward the desk in the office.

Well, at least over here, Algram won’t hit us if he gets sent flying.

“Oh, something smells good.”

Clery’s sense of smell seemed to be a little bit sharper with his vision obscured. He sniffed at the aroma and turned toward me with a smile on his face, “Miss, what’s this smell?”

“...? Um...”

Probably whatever Galan was eating earlier.

I looked at the desk.

“.....”

And I fell silent.

Sitting there was a rather unexpected sight.

This was the Land of Greenery and Harmony. It was a vegetarian land; a place where meat was banned. If someone wanted to, for instance, let their younger brother eat meat, he would have to take the risk of ordering it from a foreign land. That was how staunchly meat was avoided here, and those who preferred it were utterly persecuted.

And yet...

“...There’s a hamburg steak here.”

A half-eaten hamburg steak was sitting on Galan’s desk. Hamburg steak. A dish that normally required meat, yet there it was.

My goodness! What could be the meaning of this?

“Hey...! N-no! You’ve got the wrong idea!”

It was, obviously, a rather inappropriate thing for the leader to be eating. When Galan turned around, he really started panicking. While he was looking toward us, he started making excuses. “That’s not a normal hamburg steak!” he insisted. “It’s a tofu burger!”

And then, unfortunately, he made his only mistake, which was letting us distract his attention while he made his excuses.

“Don’t look away during a fight!”

Algram put all his energy into one blow and landed a direct hit to Galan’s chin during the moment he left himself open.

“F-failure...!”

Galan’s steely body hung for a moment in the air, then crashed into the office floor as he collapsed.

I think we can consider that a decisive defeat.

“Victory is ours!”

Algram raised his fist in the air.

I think it's no exaggeration to say that both victory and meat are in his grasp.

But I wanted to set Clery's eyes free before too long, so all I could think was that I wanted Algram to hurry up and put on his clothes.

"Miss." Clery tugged at my sleeve. "What happened?"

He turned his face toward me, but I was still covering his eyes. I looked back and forth between Algram and Clery for a minute.

"Looks like you'll be able to have your barbecue now," was all I answered.



Smoke was rising from the fairly spacious lawn, along with a delicious smell.

The recaptured meat was slowly cooking atop the barbecue grill. The two brothers stood restlessly in front of the grill, waiting for the meat to be ready to eat.

"Listen up, Clery! Meat is tastiest when you grill it slowly. If we get the heat level wrong, our meat could turn to charcoal in an instant."

"G-got it!"

It was a very charming scene.

Reasoning that they didn't want to spoil their dinner and that they wanted to save some meat for their mother to eat, they had only placed three pieces of meat on the grill. The brothers didn't scramble for the meat but rather waited patiently for it to cook.

Ultimately, we did end up hosting our barbecue.

"But that was really quite unexpected," I said as I pondered the sequence of events that had led us back to their house. "I never thought you would actually get permission."

Algram had just barely secured victory in his fistfight against Galan, but Galan had returned the meat to him with surprisingly little trouble when it was over.

Moreover...

"I lost... Do whatever you want."

He had even given the brothers permission to host a barbecue in their yard

that afternoon.

“The loser yields to the winner... That’s how things go in the world of men, Lady Witch,” Algram said as he turned the meat over.

I couldn’t be sure just what kind of change of heart Galan had gone through. He was the person who had banned the sale of meat in the first place. But I thought maybe it was— “Perhaps he wasn’t a vegetarian to begin with, either?”

Since I was a traveler, I wasn’t all that knowledgeable about how things worked around there, but piecing together everything I had heard, I’d figured out that Galan must have previously faced off against Algram’s mother in an election.

If, for instance, there had always been a lot of vegetarians, then in order to beat her in the election—in order to sway public opinion—it might have been very rational for him to align himself with the vegetarians.

But Galan had been eating a hamburger steak made of tofu, so it seemed unlikely that he was a big fan of vegetables.

“Good grief. So banning meat was a terrible idea from the start...”

Just as we had been about to leave city hall—

—Galan had let out a huge sigh as he tossed a bite of cold tofu hamburger into his mouth.

There’s no meaning to a life in which you’re constantly stifling your own desires... Now, who was it who said that?

“If only this incident could serve as an opportunity for the restrictions on eating meat to be relaxed,” Algram muttered as he stared at the meat while it cooked.

“Well, don’t you suppose things might change slowly from now on?” I said, looking at him.

You seem to be good at waiting?

Gazing vacantly at the barbecue grill, he muttered, “Slowly, huh...?”

Yes, that’s right.

“Just like grilling meat, slow and steady.”





CHAPTER 4

The House of Fluttering Birds

○ The Ashen Witch

The sky seemed to go on forever. There were only the slightest wisps of clouds floating through it.

There was hardly anything to block the view as a cool wind blew across the hilly country, setting the flowers swaying up and down. There were no signs of civilization and barely any traces of human activity.

The witch walked alone through the wild, wide-open landscape.

“...What nice scenery.”

She let those silly few words slip out. She was somewhat overcome with emotion at the utterly ordinary scene. The witch was dressed in a pointy black hat and a black robe. Her name was Elaina.

She was a witch, and a traveler.

She didn't always walk when she traveled. She often rode on her broom and enjoyed the scenery at her leisure, but this time, she wasn't doing that.

She was simply walking slowly along.

By the way—

Just who could that witch be, who was still indulging herself in such freedom on her solo journey?

That's right, it's me.

There was one small house a short distance down the gently sloping road. From where I was, I couldn't see the whole thing, but I could tell it was probably two stories tall. The walls were made of pale brick, and the roof was red. It was constructed very simply—as far as I could see from where I was, it looked like it was just a long, narrow box.

It was an ordinary, boring house. Just a plain house that looked like it might

belong to a modest family. To all appearances, it was just a lovely, commonplace sight.

But I was frowning.

Right over the top of the house was something a little strange.

“.....”

Just overhead, birds were drifting around and around in pleasant-seeming circles. As far as I could count from a distance, there were at least ten of them. Whether there was something in the house or they were being kept as pets—I couldn’t tell, but the birds kept drawing the same neat circles, wheeling round and round in the sky as if they were searching for something. Their behavior was indescribably strange.

At the same time, I was probably a strange traveler too, as I was drawn to such a strange place.

I walked straight on toward the house, and before long, I arrived at the front gate.

When I had been looking at it from afar, I had thought it was probably just an ordinary house, but of course, now that I was closer, I could see a sign standing before the door.

It read—

THE HOUSE OF FLUTTERING BIRDS

.....

Written on the sign were words that described just what I was seeing. I suspected that if I opened the door, it would become clear just what this house was and why the birds were fluttering over it.

“I feel like this is extremely suspicious, but...”

If I had been someone with an ordinary disposition, I would have been on my guard. At that point, a normal person would have thought, *Oh, there’s no way anyone living in such an obviously suspicious building is normal, is there? They must be bad news; I’d better hurry up and turn around!* and gotten out of there. Actually, the moment they saw the house from a distance, they would have

thought, *Wow, it must be covered in poop!* A normal person would absolutely never visit the house.

That's right, exactly.

Well, then—

"Pardon the intrusion!"

Knock-knock-knock-knock-knock-knock-knock-knock.

I knocked at the door with great vigor.

Travelers are people who live their lives every day with energy and enthusiasm. Remember that.

To be clear, at the moment, I was thinking it was unlikely that anyone actually lived in the house. I assumed that the area had long since been abandoned by humans and that the decaying house was being reclaimed by nature.

However—

My expectation was, unsurprisingly, quickly overturned.

"Yes?"

Someone came out.

I was shocked to see it was a very beautiful young woman.

○ The Merchant

The woman who opened the door and identified herself as the "Favor Witch" was enchantingly beautiful and seemed very charming as well, though I was judging only by her outward appearance.

"Welcome to my house, esteemed guest."

She bowed her head respectfully as she walked past me toward the sitting room and informed me, "You are my last guest. How fortunate."

Last?

"Do you mean I'm your last visitor for today?"

The same sunlight that was streaming in through the windows was falling evenly across the plains outside. It seemed kind of early to close up shop.

But the woman shook her head.

“No, after today, I don’t intend to ever perform this job again. I’ve been thinking it’s about time for me to quit. So you are quite literally my last customer.”

Based on what she told me, it would be difficult to say the woman’s business was a very efficient one. It required specialized magical techniques, but her patrons only paid her one copper piece.

The money that changed hands between her and her customers was only enough to buy a small slice of bread. It was hardly appropriate for the risks she assumed and the special skills she possessed.

So it made perfect sense that she should resign from the job.

“That’s really too bad...” Nonetheless, I was, as she had said, fortunate for having made it here right before she quit.

“Yes,” she said, nodding slowly. “But I don’t intend to cut any corners, even though it’s my last job, so don’t worry—” As she spoke, she took her wand in hand and waved it in the air.

Immediately after she did, the window behind her opened.

She did something I couldn’t have.

She wielded a power I could never have mastered, no matter how hard I worked at it. Through the open window came all the birds that I was sure I had seen flying above the building, forming a line as if they had arranged it all beforehand. They flew right in and lined up behind her.

There were a wide variety of birds, from small to large, from the kind of birds you often saw in cities getting breadcrumbs from residents to ferocious, carnivorous birds of prey.

The Favor Witch stood up, and keeping the tip of her wand pointed toward the birds, she looked at me.

“So then, which one do you want to become?”

Won’t you try flying freely through the air?

I had heard that such letters were sometimes unexpectedly delivered, targeting the poorest populations of neighboring lands. Those people who were down and out, saddled with huge debts. The nameless masses living in slums. Citizens of countries that had been defeated in wars. The letters, sent to them from who-knows-where, served as invitations to the witch's house.

For just a single copper coin, I'll make you forget your daily suffering forever.

Fascinated by the promises in the letters, many people visited the woman's house.

The spell the Favor Witch had created could apparently swap the consciousness of a human and a bird for a set period of time. I didn't know what principle such a spell operated on, but I'd heard that many invitees had flown through the air as birds thanks to her spell. For just one copper coin.

"By the way, you are not one of my expected guests, are you?"

The Favor Witch smiled sweetly and looked down at me.

I shook my head.

"Occasionally, someone will be so rude as to sell one of the letters you distribute to a merchant."

"Oh my. So that means you bought the letter off of that merchant?"

"No. I am that merchant."

I had been curious about the place for a while. I had picked up various bits of information as I wandered from country to country. Not very many people knew about her house, and I had never met someone who had actually visited it. There were many rumors about its existence, but little else was said about it.

People talked about how there were always mages in the sky when they looked up as they led their cramped and boring daily lives. How, unlike themselves, who could only crawl along the ground, the mages had the sky. How the mages had access to something they could only look up at.

I heard from people who had always yearned for what the mages had.

People who wondered what the world looked like from the sky.

“I welcome anyone who yearns for the sky, even if you are not one of my invitees.” Standing before me, the Favor Witch smiled at me. “I want even those people who cannot use magic to know the splendor of the sky. That is why I started doing this job.”

“But you said I was your last customer?”

“Yes. It’s unfortunate, but when you do a job for such a low price, unsavory characters tend to show up.”

She smiled.

It was a fleeting smile.

According to what she said, she was going to change locations and go into a different business. She also told me she would most likely never be able to work again as an ally to the poor, showing them scenery from the sky.

In other words, that genuinely made me her final customer. The last person who would fly through the air at will, despite being a human who could not use magic.

“Which bird will you choose?”

She put the question to me again.

The line of birds was still waiting politely near the woman.

Any one of them would have been fine.

I pointed.

“Let me see—I think I’ll go with this blue bird.”

I was fortunate.

○ **The Midnight Witch**

“Have you ever seen this man before?”

I pointed at a photograph and showed it to the Favor Witch, who was facing me across the table.

In those days, I had just started working with the United Magic Association, and I was still uncharacteristically enthusiastic about the job. I frowned and

scowled at the other woman so that she wouldn't underestimate me.

The Favor Witch, on the other hand, was unfazed.

"Yes I have. He was my last customer at my former job."

"You've got a very good memory, then."

"I simply treasure each and every one of my patrons."

Three months had passed since the disappearance of the merchant. The last traces of the man stopped at the house where the Favor Witch had previously lived.

The building had been completely abandoned by the time personnel from the United Magic Association got there. She had already moved on.

About three months' time had gone by, and I had finally managed to track her down. She had been living a quiet life in a small country, and when I'd prodded to see if I could ask her a few questions about her previous employment, she had nodded and invited me into her home.

She appeared to earn very good money. The extremely spacious residence was much too luxurious for a single woman's use.

"What kind of work are you doing now?"

Apparently, her previous line of work had been providing a service by which patrons could become birds for the cost of a single copper coin.

"I don't work or anything." She shook her head readily. "Right now, I am only doing my research."

"Is that so...? It looks like you are living quite well, in spite of that."

"I have some moderate savings."

The Favor Witch chuckled.

I could tell the tea she had set out was also high-grade stuff. The swaying steam rising from the teacup carried such a lovely fragrance, I almost sighed.

"Let's talk about the merchant," I said. I looked at her and started talking. "All news of him ceased after he sent a letter to his daughter saying he was headed for your house. He hasn't appeared since, not even to meet with his regular

customers. Are you sure he didn't say something to you? Might he have mentioned where he was going after he was a customer at your place?"

"No, I'm afraid he didn't say a thing." She bowed her head, still smiling. "But don't you think he might be off somewhere gallivanting throughout the world right now? After all, he is a merchant, isn't he?" she added at the end.

"....."

"Unfortunately, I don't happen to have any information that will help you. I'm sorry." She hung her head.

I doubt she's lying. Surely she doesn't know where the man went.

But—

"I see. That's too bad." I hung my head.

I had been lying through my teeth.

I hadn't expected clear answers from her from the start.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't be of more assistance."

"No, please don't worry about it."

To begin with—

I had come to visit this place for a different reason entirely.

"By the way, could I ask you one more thing?"

"Hmm? Oh, sure. Go ahead."

"Just how much profit did you make off your previous job?"

".....?"

Perhaps she didn't understand the meaning behind my question, or maybe she hadn't expected me to suddenly ask about it. All she did was tilt her head to the side in confusion.

I continued.

"I assume you need considerable savings in order to live in such a grand mansion. And yet you said that right now you are only conducting research. Exactly how much money were you able to earn at your previous job?"

“Ah...” She let out a sigh. She seemed sad. “I’m afraid it wasn’t the kind of business you are thinking of. It was something I did in order to help people who cannot use magic realize their dreams. So I only accepted a single copper coin.”

I see.

But—

“*From your customers, you mean.*” I stood up and took my wand in hand. “A tip came in to the United Magic Association a little while ago, and we arrested some merchants who had been smuggling human organs. The tip said they were cutting open human bodies with magic and selling fresh organs on the black market for a high price.”

Apparently, these black-market organs were magically preserved and sold for a lot of money. Thanks to the work of the United Magic Association, the organ dealers were arrested, and the smuggling ring was stopped.

But after that, one more question surfaced.

The source of the organs.

The group doing the smuggling were not the ones taking people’s lives and removing their organs. Ultimately, all they did was purchase the organs from a different person.

“The smugglers immediately told us where they acquired the organs.”

According to the information they had given us, a lone witch living somewhere in the hill country—a woman who went by the name of the Favor Witch—had been making periodic deliveries to the organ dealers.

“Apparently, that witch brought them *corpses that were entirely too fresh*, almost as if the spirits had been magically removed from the bodies. So then—”

I pointed my wand at her.

“Just how much profit did you make off your previous job?”

It was a simple story.

Since she knew for certain that she could get money elsewhere, she had only taken one copper coin from each patron who came to fly through the sky as a

bird, that's all.

People who were down and out, saddled with huge debts. The nameless masses living in slums. Citizens of countries that had been defeated in wars.

The Favor Witch had sent out letters that targeted these vulnerable people, luring them to her door with the promise of a spell that would switch their consciousness with a bird for a set time, and then put them to sleep.

Not a single one of the people whose consciousness was put into a bird ever returned from the house.

"I needed to perform repeated experiments for my research, no matter the cost. They were all very helpful for my research," the Favor Witch stated in a later hearing, after she was captured by the United Magic Association.

The spell she was working on was a spell that would forcibly move a person's consciousness into *another person*—in other words, a spell to sacrifice others so that she might have eternal life.

It was probably still in development.

It sounded like she had been testing the spell on birds.

She had been getting money for her experiments by putting people's minds into birds, then selling their vacant bodies to the organ smugglers. Which meant that, for her, the house with birds flying around it was both her laboratory and fertile ground for making money.

Without a doubt, as far as the Favor Witch was concerned, that house was the most logical place to be.

Once it was all over, I headed for a branch office of the United Magic Association, where an office clerk bowed politely to me. "Thank you for your hard work, Lady Midnight Witch. We've confirmed the Favor Witch's role in the incidents. It sounds like she'll be sentenced to some severe punishment. That's your achievement. Congratulations."

After praising the work of a newcomer, the clerk continued, "I'm sure you already know this, but please don't let a word of the truth about this incident get out. As far as the masses know, the Favor Witch lured poor people to her

house surrounded by birds, killed them, and sold off their remains to smugglers, and that's what happened."

What had the Favor Witch been researching in that house? It had been decided that the Association would be concealing all information about that part.

It was an attempt to prevent anyone else from trying to continue her research.

The incident was resolved.

"...Is something the matter?"

But apparently, I was wearing a long face. The clerk looked at me with a puzzled expression.

"Well..."

The Favor Witch, who deceived people and used their lives to further her own experiments, had been safely captured. No innocent person would be caught in her sinister clutches ever again.

But—

"Something's still bothering me a little."

"Bothering you?"

I nodded and looked at the clerk.

"Listen. When was it that the United Magic Association captured the smugglers?" I asked.

There was no need to look it up. The clerk answered me immediately. "Four months ago."

Four months earlier. In other words, it had taken one month's time before I had located the Favor Witch's dwelling.

When the United Magic Association captured the organ smugglers and discovered their connection to the Favor Witch living somewhere in the hill country, they had widely publicized the facts in the surrounding lands. They had made it known that anyone who went to her would be killed.

An alert was issued not to visit under any circumstances, no matter the temptation.

And yet—

“...Why on earth did he go to that house, I wonder?”

I couldn't help but question why the merchant had gone out of his way to visit a place that was known to be dangerous. I had a feeling of unease that I couldn't shake.

“Maybe he didn't know about it?”

“Maybe, if he was an ordinary guy, but it's hard to believe that a merchant who travels from country to country wouldn't read a newspaper article now and then, right?”

“So he knew, and he went there on purpose?”

“We can't discount the possibility.”

“I can't imagine that someone would intentionally throw their life away like that, though...”

“...Yeah.”

And that's why this is bothering me.

The merchant who became the witch's final victim probably hadn't known exactly what was going on in the house with birds flying overhead, but he should have known what would happen if he went there.

He shouldn't have even considered going there unless he had a very good reason for it. Not to mention that the merchant, unlike the victims before him, was not struggling with poverty. If he was really a merchant, it should never have even occurred to him to approach that house.

Not unless he, like the Favor Witch, had a logical reason.

○ The Ashen Witch

“It's rare for people to come all the way out to a place like this, but it does happen sometimes.”

Maintaining a carefree attitude the whole time, the woman who had invited

me into her house set cups of tea down on the table and asked me, “Miss Witch, would you happen to be a traveler?”

I nodded.

“As you can see, I am a traveler.”

“Indeed you are. I thought so. The people living in the countries around here don’t come near this place—,” she said.

Judging from appearances, she was probably in her early twenties. She had long black hair and startlingly pale skin, and the arm that reached for her teacup was thin.

“So this building...it has a dark history.”

She spoke quietly and told me about the ghastly incident that had taken place in the house.

A long time ago, when my host was a child, the witch who had lived in this house had apparently lured innocent people in, used them as subjects in her experiments, and then killed them.

Since it was the scene of such a tragic incident, after the witch had vacated it, there was no one who wanted to settle in the house, and it stood abandoned in the middle of hill country for a long time.

Then, my host said, she had purchased the house, and now she lived quietly there by herself.

“I’m impressed you can live here.”

I gave my frank opinion. I didn’t particularly believe in ghosts and the like, but even so, I wouldn’t want to live in a place that was the scene of such an affair. It would feel a little creepy.

But she didn’t seem to mind it.

Instead, she put on a gentle smile. She seemed completely at ease.

“When I was little, I contracted a terrible disease, and the doctor told me I wouldn’t live to adulthood. In order to save me, my father traveled the world, working hard and making lots of money. But even so, he couldn’t cure my

illness. All he could do was help me live a little longer.”

“...What’s your father’s trade?”

“He was a merchant.”

“*Was?*”

“He died when I was little. In this very house.”

“.....”

I could only respond with silence, while she told me, persistently, matter-of-factly, “My father died, and all I had left was the large sum of condolence money I received, and his body, missing most of the organs. The money saved my life. But my father is never coming back.”

“.....”

“You know, I don’t believe in ghosts and the like, but somehow, when I’m here, it’s like I’m with my father—that’s how I feel.”

She told me she felt like her father’s presence was somewhere in the house.

“Is that why you are living here?”

“Yes. That, and because I had some of that condolence money left to spend. The house was cheap because of the incident,” she said with a smile.

But I couldn’t tell whether it was okay for me to smile back or not, so for the time being, I wet my lips with the tea that had been set out for me.

“I’m almost certain no one set a hand on anything in here after the incident. Not a single thing seems to have changed since it happened. The furnishings are exactly as they were, and...”

She looked outside the window.

A single blue bird flew in through the open window, and after making a slow circle around the room, then roaming about looking for a place to land, it came to rest on top of the girl’s shoulder.

“...even the birds that the Favor Witch kept as pets haven’t changed all these years; they seem to only live right here.”

“They seem quite attached to you.”

“There was probably just nowhere else for it to sit.” She let out a very small sigh and told me, “Besides, this is the only one that’s tame.”

The blue bird peered up at her from her shoulder.

“Just this one, for whatever reason, comes near me.”

She extended a pale, thin finger and stroked the bird’s head with her fingertip.

“Strange, right?”

©Azure



The blue bird made a happy expression as the pale, thin finger stroked it affectionately.

After drinking tea with my host and enjoying a short rest, I returned to my travels.

It seemed like the girl who lived in the mysterious house in the hills would continue staying there in the dwelling with the dark past, along with the birds.

“If you ever pass this way again, be sure to drop by. I’m always here alone, so —”

With those words, she saw me to the door.

Surrounded by swaying flowers, I waved to her and walked off.

Apparently, I hadn’t stayed very long. Looking up, I saw that the sun was still shining brightly. The breeze blew past, filling the whole area with a pleasant aroma.

All around me, the scenery was just as it had been before I’d gone inside the house.

I felt certain the girl was going to continue on living in this house in the hill country, with her father’s lingering presence.

“.....”

I looked up at the house.

Sure enough, the scenery hadn’t changed much.

As before, the birds were still flying overhead.



CHAPTER 5

Moonlight Vampire

When the witch opened the window of the timeworn inn, a splendid spring breeze blew in out of the night and caressed the back of her neck.

The full moon, suspended in the cloudless sky, bathed the town in its light.

With a hand on her swaying ash-gray hair, the witch turned back around and got straight into bed. The evening light illuminated her room just as brightly as the town outside.

She wasn't planning to go to sleep just yet.

She pulled the bookmark out of the book she had bought that afternoon and resumed reading. As someone who wandered from unknown land to unknown land, buying a new book at each destination was one of the things she enjoyed.

She mostly knew what to expect when she headed into a new bookstore. Most of the books set out on display would be popular sellers in the region. It gave her a way to learn about the interests of the people living there.

That was why visiting bookstores held a special meaning for her, a witch and a traveler. Though she did sometimes also wander in to visit bookstores simply because she loved books.

The book she had purchased that day was a mystery novel.

It was about a murder mystery that had happened at an inn. The bodies just kept piling up, one after another, every morning. Not knowing who the culprit was, the guests and employees at the inn began to suspect one another... The book had a typical story setup. If there was one thing that was different from an archetypal mystery novel, it was that the main character, who was acting as the detective in the story, was entirely nocturnal and didn't even leave their room during the day. That, and that the victims had all had the blood drained from their bodies.

As the witch turned the pages, the story finally headed for its inevitable conclusion.

The culprit became clear.

“A vampire...?”

The witch was a little bit disappointed.

The culprit was actually the detective who had been moving the story forward, and the victims hadn't had any blood flowing through their veins because the detective had sucked it all out. It was a ridiculous trick.

What the heck? the witch thought.

“What the heck?” she grumbled out loud.

Despite her disappointment, she went ahead and read the story to its conclusion. When she had turned the final page, she set the book on the edge of the bed and went straight to sleep.

In the moonlit city, the witch, just like all the other residents, quietly greeted the end of the day.

However—

“Good evening, young lady.”

There was someone in the city who greeted the start of her day just as all the people in town fell asleep.

Sitting unnoticed on the frame of the open window was a young woman with light brown hair. She looked to be in her twenties. She wore a flashy red-and-black dress that was gaudy for her age. Her eyes were red, and fangs were visible in her mouth as she smiled suggestively. On top of all that, she even had bat-like wings on her back.

She was obviously a vampire.

“I am a vampire.”

She even described herself as one.

“I hold no grudge against you, but—I'm hungry tonight, you see, so I'll be taking a bit of your blood.”

The vampire hopped down from the windowsill and, without hesitation, slowly approached the sleeping witch.

The floor of the old inn creaked terribly each time she took a step. But perhaps the witch was having a particularly pleasant dream, because she gave no sign of waking from her slumber.

At last, the vampire came to a stop beside the bed and looked down at the witch with the ash-gray hair.

She brushed aside the long ashen hair and slowly exposed the witch's pale throat.

The vampire whispered.

"I'm sorry."

Then she placed her hand on the defenseless witch's throat, opened her mouth wide, and prepared to bite down.

But—

"All right!" The vampire delivered that idiotic line, but the taste that spread through her mouth as she said it was not the delicious flavor of a young woman's blood, but something much more pungent.

An ingredient with such a tenacious taste that it would linger in her mouth for days.

A vampire's weakness.

It was garlic.

"Gross!"

As soon as she recognized the taste filling her mouth, the vampire spit it out right then and there, but the persistent smell of the garlic irritated her nose terribly. It stank so badly, she couldn't stand it. It was so bad that her eyes started to tear up.

"Looks like the rumor that you can't handle garlic was true, huh?"

The witch gazed at the suffering vampire triumphantly. She sat up in bed, and with a yawn, she asked, "I suppose you thought I was really asleep?"

The witch smirked. She had put on an act in order to draw the vampire in. She hadn't actually been sleeping. The witch had just been pretending to fall into a

defenseless slumber so that she could toss garlic into the vampire's mouth.

"Bleeech...how awful... It stinks! You're the worst..." The vampire didn't really understand what had happened; she was just suffering the effects. Bits of the garlic that she had carelessly bitten down on tumbled out of her open mouth.

Faced with such a sight, the witch said, "Uh, sorry, but I can't have you messing up the sheets..." and picked up the garlic bits with her handkerchief. While she was at it, she wiped the vampire's mouth.

By the way, just who do you think that witch was?

I don't have to tell you, do I?

That's right, it was me.

"It hurts... It stinks... How awful...ewwwwww!"

"I've already wiped your mouth, and I've removed the garlic, so I think you'll be fine. Will you take a deep breath for me? Like this...*haaah*."

"Haaah."

"...That stinks."

"....."



First, I suppose I'd better tell you why I was facing off against a vampire.

In order to do that, I first need to back up and tell you about an incident that happened right after I arrived in the city.

It was only the previous morning that I had knocked on the gates. I had not come all that way, flying over pleasant spring meadows on my broom, by accident.

As a matter of fact, I was invited there by individuals working for the local government.

Be that as it may, I am a traveler and a witch, so of course, the reason for the invitation was not for sightseeing.

I was there for work.

“The fact is, we’ve got a vampire in our city,” an official told me with a sigh as soon as I arrived at the government offices. He said it with a very serious look on his face.

It didn’t seem to be a joke.

“A vampire?”

Are you serious? They actually exist? I tilted my head, making my skepticism obvious.

“Yes.” The official nodded gravely. “The sightings began in our city about one month ago. We think she probably slipped in from some other land without anyone noticing. The citizens are very worried about this vampire. We don’t even know where she is hiding. So we want to exterminate her quickly.”

“Exterminate.”

So in this city, vampires are treated on the same level as vermin?

“Having to be on guard against the vampire seems to be causing a lot of stress for our residents.”

“The only damage is emotional...?”

“And recently, there have also been repeated incidents of wallet theft. Eyewitnesses report that the culprit was sporting black wings, so people are saying it’s probably the vampire.”

“...There haven’t been any injuries from blood sucking?”

“There have been some, but there have been more reports of robbery...”

“.....”

“All this is to say, we would like to ask you to exterminate the vampire using some cunning spell, Lady Witch.”

I’m not sure what to say...

“I’m sorry. I have never met a vampire before, so even if I wanted to exterminate her, I don’t know how I would do so.”

It seemed a little strange for me to say such a thing, given that I had readily answered the city’s summons, but unfortunately, when it came to vampire

extermination, I was a complete amateur. At best, I only had a few scraps of knowledge that could be true or entirely false, like that vampires couldn't stand garlic, or that they were susceptible to sunlight, or that they didn't show up in mirrors.

There's no guarantee I'll be able to help you, you know?

"Sure, we thought that might be the case." The official nodded. "That's why we invited a vampire expert here today."

At that moment, the door to the office was thrown open with great force.

"I am the expert."

He was a bearded old man.

"I've compiled a report on the characteristics of the vampire who has appeared in our city. I hope it will help you to exterminate her." The expert pulled a single scrap of paper from his pocket.

"Uh-huh..."

So she has so few characteristics that you could fit them all on a single piece of paper?

Then the expert read out the supposed characteristics of the vampire.

"Night after night, she sneaks into houses where people have left the windows open, sucks their blood, and flees."

Night after night, she sneaks into houses where people have left the windows open, sucks their blood, and flees...?

"Isn't that a mosquito?"

"No."

"So then, what happens to people who have their blood sucked? Do they turn into vampires?"

"No, that's never come up in any of the victims' reports."

"So what happens, then?"

"Mostly, the area around the bite gets itchy."

“That is a mosquito, then!”

“No. To start with, the vampire that’s been skulking around the city has all the characteristics of a biological female.”

“The female mosquitoes are the ones that suck blood, you know.”

“...It might be a mosquito after all.”

The expert folded easily.

.....

“Is this man really an expert?”

He’s obviously a questionable character.

I whispered my question to the government official quietly enough so that the self-proclaimed expert could not hear me.

The official nodded.

“He’s an author who wrote a mystery novel in which the culprit is a detective and a vampire. He’s rather famous.”

So all he did was write a book, is that what you’re telling me?

“...Haven’t you got the wrong person?”

“But he was the only one in the city who seemed to know anything about vampires... And personally, I’m a fan of his work, so I decided to invite him here today.”

“.....”

“By the way, I’m planning to get him to sign my copy later.”

“...Isn’t that abuse of public office?”

“Do you want a copy, too, Lady Witch?”

“No thanks.”

At any rate, that’s what I went through before deciding to face off against the vampire.

I had accepted a fairly large sum of money as a deposit and gone out of my

way to travel all the way there, so I felt it would be foolish not to take the job.

And besides, even if I'm unfortunate enough to get bitten, it sounds like I'll just get itchy, so I should be fine, right?

I felt fairly carefree about the whole affair.

Once I had decided to accept the commission, my course of action was clear.

I had purchased a huge quantity of garlic from a merchant, and bought a book while I was at it. Then, after killing time until the evening, I had opened the window of my room and lain down on the bed to wait.

You know what happened after that.

The vampire waltzed shamelessly in, and I threw garlic into her mouth.

"How awful...! You humans are always this way! All I want is just a little bit of your blood, but I get nothing but harassment! Oh, how I hate humans!"

The vampire spit out saliva and abusive language at the same time.

"....."

The bedsheets, and even the floor, were soiled. Irritably, I wiped at them with my handkerchief, then looked up at the vampire.

The vampire was scrubbing at her eyes with the sleeve of her blouse.

Is she—?

"...Are you crying?"

"Huh? I'm not crying." She glared at me.

"Oh, but—"

"I am not crying! I just got something in my eye! Jeez!"

The vampire was angry.

"By the way, what's your name?" I asked as I folded my handkerchief. "And for what reason did you come to this city?"

"I don't want to tell someone as mean as you." The vampire looked away in a huff.

“I’ve got plenty of spare garlic, you know.”

I pulled out some of the garlic I had stocked up on earlier in the day. I broke off a clove and held it up for her to see.

Sure enough, the vampire seemed to have some kind of intense aversion to garlic. She stared at my hands and let out a little shriek as she flinched.

“I—I won’t give in to threats!”

My, my.

“But if you don’t tell me, I’ll throw it at you!”

I was getting kind of into it.

“Stop! That’s harassment, that is!”

She shrieked again. There were tears in her fearful eyes as she trembled and put her head in her hands.

I didn’t really understand why, but I was feeling very excited.

“I’m just saying, if you won’t tell me, I might pull out the big guns,” I said, fighting to maintain my composure despite the sadistic urge that was welling up inside me.

“A-agh...”

Then she asked, defeated, “I wonder if I could borrow a chair?” When I nodded, she took several deep breaths in and out, and after expelling the remaining garlic smell from her mouth, she began to speak.

“My name is Oronella... May I ask your name?”

I nodded.

“Elaina. I’m a traveling witch, the Ashen Witch.”

“I see. Listen, Elaina, as I’m sure you can tell from looking at me, I am not an ordinary human. Do you get what I’m saying?”

“You’re a sneaky thief?”

“No! Jeez!” she shouted angrily. “I’m a vampire! A vampire! The creatures that suck human blood!”

I had guessed as much from the fact that she felt an intense revulsion toward garlic. Even with my limited knowledge, I was certain she was indeed a vampire.

“I thought vampires couldn’t enter people’s homes without permission?”

I feel like there was something like that written in the book I just read.

“No, that’s not true at all.”

“Oh, but—”

“By any chance, are you the type of person who thinks they’re an expert just because they read a book?”

I flung a piece of garlic at her.

“Ouch!”

Okay, pull yourself together.

I gazed at the vampire—or rather, at Oronella.

Judging from appearances, she seemed to be in her twenties, but often, people who looked like humans but were not human were quite a bit older than they appeared.

“How old are you?”

“Tch. Who suddenly asks a girl her age like that? You’ve really got no tact.”

I readied myself to throw another piece of garlic.

“I’m ninety-two.” Oronella shuddered.

“I see.”

So that means you’ve been alive nearly one hundred years?

Interesting.

“That’s quite an advanced age...”

“How can you say that?! In the vampire world, I’m still an adolescent! My age isn’t even into the triple digits, and my skin is still fresh and young! Look!”

The vampire suddenly brought her face close to mine. She got her cheek right up near me with a huff, as if to encourage me to take a closer look.

“So?”

Sure enough, her skin was beautiful, but—

“The smell of garlic on you is overwhelming.”

“.....”

Oronella looked totally disheartened. She pulled her knees up to her chest in her chair and whined feebly, “Ugh...you’re so mean. What did I ever do to you...?”

From what she had said, it wasn’t difficult to infer that there were communities of vampires out there somewhere. I wasn’t sure what kind of lives they lived in those communities, but at the very least, I was certain it had to be more pleasant than heading out to human cities and going around drinking their blood.

I reasoned that she had to have some very good reason for going out of her way to come to a human settlement, like a small-town girl hoping to make it in the big city.

“Why did you come to this city?”

So I asked her directly.

She opened her mouth and huffed, “Humph!”

“You still won’t tell me?” I asked, looking up at her coyly.

She’s wearing down...

“I don’t know whether I should or not.”

It’s pretty shameless of me to ask, considering I was hired by the people of this city to exterminate her.

But I guess she won’t mind me asking about the circumstances that brought her here.

“.....”

Oronella stared at me silently.

Then she slowly opened her mouth and said, “Well, it’s not much of a story,

but do you want to hear it anyway?"

Usually, people who start their stories with an expression like that end up describing very difficult circumstances. I know that perfectly well.

So after preparing myself adequately, I nodded.

"Okay," she said simply, then started to tell me.

"I found myself prowling around this human city about half a year ago now—"

With a serious air about her, she told me a story from a long time in the past.



Several decades earlier—

"Say, human blood is really tasty, you know."

When Oronella was still quite young.

Apparently, Oronella's grandfather had once spent some time living outside their community, in a human city. He often told Oronella and her younger sisters his old stories.

"Human blood...?"

The two girls were puzzled, but their grandfather went on.

"Especially the blood of young women. It's incredibly delicious. I used to have one girl after another, a different one every night... Ah, what good memories..."

Oronella had probably developed an interest in human cities because of the way her grandfather's eyes always sparkled greatly when he told his old stories.

"....."

I'm very sorry to cut in when you've just started your reminiscence, but—

"What kind of man was your grandfather?" I interrupted.

"From what he told me, he was a vampire who used to be the cock of the walk in the human world."

"Is that so? Hmm. Oh, and by the way, no one says 'cock of the walk' anymore."

"Plenty of people use that phrase where I'm from, you know!"

“That’s just because you’re from the country.”

At any rate, time went on.

Then, not long ago—

The young woman passed every day in boredom in the vampire community.

The community where she lived was deep in the forest far away from human habitation, down in a cave system, both as an escape from the sunlight that hurt them and as a way of avoiding unnecessary conflicts.

Many vampires were perfectly happy living peaceful lives there.

But that wasn’t the case for Oronella.

“I can’t take it anymore! There’s nothing interesting to do out here in the middle of nowhere! And all there ever is to eat is animal blood! It’s damp and depressing down here! I hate it! I want to party it up every night in a human city! I want to drink real live human blood!”

The ninety-year-old vampire complained every day, loudly enough that her shouting echoed off her neighbors’ houses.

That’s right, she was right in the middle of her troublesome rebellious phase (at ninety).

She was a sheltered (ninety-year-old) girl who knew nothing of the world and longed for the big city.

Ninety years old...

Apparently, her parents were awfully perplexed by this rebellious phase. For a human, it would have come preposterously late in life.

“I can’t believe you’re saying that stuff again! Nothing good will happen if you go to a human city. That’s why I’m always telling you to give up on the idea! Be a good girl, stay in the community, and get yourself a job as a blood collector!” her mother scolded.

Apparently, in the vampire community, they mainly harvested their blood from livestock like cows and sheep and used that as food.

“No! I want to go!” But at ninety, the girl wouldn’t listen to reason.

“Say something, please. You’re her father!”

“Uh...okay. Right. Humans are, uh, scary. I’m against the idea of you going to a human city.”

“Too bad!” But she was truly a stubborn troublemaker and wouldn’t listen to anything they said.

“Good grief... Who on earth has been filling this child’s head with silly ideas...?”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh,” laughed her grandfather.

“Dad! Please don’t tell her those ridiculous stories!”

Nearly every day, all she did was cry, “I want to go! I want to go!” “I want to go! I want to go!” “I want to go to the city!”

As day after day passed, the girl finally arrived at the following conclusion: “I should just run away!”

Just. Run. Away.

She was already ninety, after all. It was a good age. A good time to overcome her parents’ objections and live freely.

And so—

After all that—

At long last—

“Bye-bye, boondocks!”

She gathered up her things and left the countryside to pursue her long-desired city life—that is, she began her life in a human city.

What kinds of things do humans know about the typical vampire?

They can’t stand the sunlight, they have a strong life force, and they generally have an attractive outward appearance, but they are also dangerous creatures that cause injury to humans.

That’s basically what we know about them, right?

After arriving in the human world, Oronella spent six months wandering

aimlessly through all sorts of places, but for the most part, no matter where she went, knowledge about vampires was mostly the same.

“Good evening, young lady. I wonder if I could have a little bit of your blood? I’m hungry, you see.”

The first place she went, she was naively honest. That was more or less what she said as she pestered people for blood.

The reaction of the young ladies of the city to this innocent and ignorant girl was thus: “Huh? Gross.”

She was flatly rejected.

“Wha...?”

Humans did not simply give out their blood. Even though it’s made inside their bodies, which would simply make more to make up for the loss, they didn’t just readily say, “*Sure, go ahead,*” and offer up their necks.

Oronella kept traveling from place to place but never found anyone who would generously give her their blood. No matter who she asked, she was always flatly rejected.

She traveled around to various places for about a month, asking people to let her have some of their blood to relieve her hunger, but no one would grant her request.

“I’m so hungry... I don’t know what to do...”

Finally, she couldn’t stand it any longer.

Apparently, when vampires got extremely hungry, they could lose control of themselves and go on a fitful hunt for human blood, so she kept drinking small amounts of animal blood to keep herself from reaching that state. But in the human cities, there were so many delicious-looking young women right before her eyes.

It was the very definition of agony for her to endure it.

Because of that, she did something a little bad.

“...I’m coming in!” Oronella took to sneaking into human dwellings through

windows that were left open. She would snuggle up close to a sleeping girl, push her hair aside, and then bare her fangs against the girl's neck.

Oronella drank just a little bit of blood each time, not even enough for a full mouthful.

By the way, she told me that the body fluids of vampires had a special characteristic. Whenever they drank too much, there was a possibility that the human body would react to the vampire's fluids and the victim could turn into a vampire, so Oronella had been taught that a single mouthful was the right amount.

Apparently, taking just a mouthful of blood also caused a change in the human body: a faint itching that developed around the area of the bite.

That made me think she was like a mosquito after all.

After that, Oronella told me, she began sneaking into people's houses through their windows night after night, drinking girls' blood.

And why was it she only drank girls' blood?

When I asked her this, she said, "Because my grandpa told me that the blood of girls is the most delicious..."

She seemed a little embarrassed when she answered. She added that she was afraid of adult men and couldn't get close to them.

What is this vampire doing, talking like an innocent young woman?

"So was it actually delicious?"

"Oh-hoh-hoh, would you like to know, Miss Witch?"

"....."

But no matter how sneaky she was, people tended to notice when their blood was being sucked out by someone in the middle of the night. There was no way she could avoid notice forever when she was sneaking into people's bedrooms after dark.

The rumor that a vampire was sneaking into houses and sucking people's blood night after night quickly spread around the city.

Before long, the citizens came up with some countermeasures.

One day, Oronella snuck in through a window as she always did.

“Chow time!”

When she opened her mouth, the girl who she expected to be sleeping sat up.

“You darn vampire!” The girl threw garlic at her.

“Ow!” The garlic hit Oronella directly on the forehead.

A sharp pain spread through her whole body, starting from the forehead. Garlic was a vampire’s natural enemy.

That night, Oronella fled into the evening air, holding her forehead.

From then on, things didn’t go well for her at all. The people in the city all decorated their windowsills with garlic, and in households without garlic on the windows, the residents would start throwing it at her as soon as she entered.

Most of the houses without garlic around the windows were those where young women lived—the houses of the victims who had previously gotten their blood sucked by Oronella. She ended up completely covered in garlic after sneaking into their houses. Her victims got their revenge on her.

“H-how cruel! Why are you doing such things to me?”

Sounds like just deserts to me.

Ultimately, Oronella ended up fleeing the city.

Once she arrived in another city, Oronella started sneaking into dwellings night after night again. At first, no one noticed her, and she was able to drink their blood. But after about a month went by, the people recognized her as a vampire, and all started throwing garlic at her.

Once they started throwing garlic at her, Oronella set off for yet another city.

She repeated the same pattern over and over again. She sucked blood, got discovered, and had garlic thrown at her. That was how she passed her days, one after another, and her situation never improved.

When she arrived at this city, for some reason, the people had thrown garlic at her as soon as they saw her and accused her of being a thief. It sounded well

deserved to me, but of course Oronella lamented, “S-so mean! Why would anyone do such a thing?!”

Right.

That was how the last half year had gone.

“.....”

So to make a long story short—

To sum it all up—

“That’s not a big deal at all, is it?”

In summary, that’s a very ordinary running-away-from-home story.

As she listened to my words, Oronella looked out the window. She had a very, very faraway look in her eyes.

“That’s what I said in the first place, isn’t it?”



I was certain that if I was going to complete the commission given to me by the city government, I would have to quickly drive Oronella out of the city, and then the matter would be resolved.

But would that fundamentally solve the problem?

Even if I were to drive her from this city, certainly she would do the same thing in a new city: sneak into houses night after night to steal people’s blood, only to wind up getting garlic thrown at her by the inhabitants, in just the same way, all over again. Surely it was important for me to admonish her here and now, to thump her on the head and scold her, to tell her that she couldn’t do this anymore.

Most importantly, and this hadn’t come up in her story, but according to the city official, she was apparently trying her hand at theft as well—not a good state of affairs by any means.

What a dilemma.

“Say, by the way, my throat is a little dry after telling that long story. I’d really like to drink something tasty.”

What a dilemma.

“Could you give me a mouthful of your delicious blood, please?”

A real head-scratcher...

I let out an exaggerated sigh and told her, “First of all, how about you stop sneaking into people’s houses through their windows?”

You’re getting involved in bad things because you’re sneaking around, isn’t that right?

“If I promise to stop sneaking into people’s houses, will you give me some of your blood?”

What are you talking about?

“I’m not letting you have any blood from my neck, sorry.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want the area around my neck to get itchy.”

“Jeez...”

She seemed dissatisfied. She stared at me with her cheeks puffed out.

I still didn’t like the idea, even if she looked at me with that face, and I wasn’t going to push my hair aside and expose the nape of my neck for her sake.

More importantly, shouldn’t my first priority be to think of a way she can be accepted in a human city?

“There’s something I’d like to ask you,” I inquired of her. “If there was some way for you to get blood legally, you would stop sneaking into people’s houses in the middle of the night to take theirs, wouldn’t you?”

“Hmm?” She tilted her head in puzzlement at my words, screwed up her face in a somewhat cranky expression, and groaned, “Mm...I guess so. I mean...if there was such a way, I could stop sneaking around at night.”

It sounded like at first, she had been foolishly honest, asking the people directly—mainly young women—as she had asked me a moment ago, to give her some of their blood. She wasn’t necessarily prowling around people’s houses because she wanted to.

She had been sneaking in simply because she had not come up with any other way to get blood.

I briefly pondered the problem, trying to think of something so that she would not have to sneak into people's houses anymore.

Isn't there any way to make this work—?

"...Ah!" Then suddenly, I hit upon something.

I can't say that it was anything groundbreaking, but it wasn't that bad.

There is one way.

"...Oronella, do you have any interest in detective work?"

As I said that, I glanced at the side of the bed.

Sitting there was the detective novel I had just finished reading.

The absurd novel in which the detective was a vampire.



"So you're saying that I could take blood as a reward for helping people?"

Oronella and I were walking side by side through the streets of the moonlit city, having a discussion.

She was a little skeptical about my suggestion.

"But I'm not particularly good at solving puzzles."



“No, I’m not saying I want you to force yourself to solve cases.” I shook my head slowly. “I’m calling you a detective, but what I want to get you to do is to find people in town who are in trouble and offer them help, that’s all. I’m thinking you’ll mainly be providing physical labor, rather than mental labor.”

“...So you’re saying I’d basically be a jack-of-all-trades?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“So shouldn’t we call me a jack-of-all-trades and not a detective?”

“Oronella. For something like this, it’s best to start with the right look...”

Though it’s not clear whether or not Oronella possesses the physical abilities that will enable her to help lots of people—

“...Well, okay.”

Ultimately, Oronella seemed to agree. Just then, she stopped walking and suddenly stared at one of the boutiques lining the street.

There were pretty clothes lined up in the window.

Oronella was reflected in the glass, gazing blankly at the clothes, and so was I, tilting my head to the side in puzzlement at her.

And then, before long—

“So what about something like this?”

She spun around once on the spot.

Immediately after she did—

The red-and-black dress she had been wearing was transformed.

On her head was a hunting hat. On her body, she was wearing a camel-colored trench coat. In that state, she was somehow or other the very picture of a classic detective that I imagined in my mind. Between the clothes and the mature air she was putting on, she looked strangely appropriate for the role.

But wait—

“...How did you do that just now?”

It looked like she had projected the clothes lined up in the boutique’s show

window straight onto her own body.

“It’s because I’m a vampire. Tricks like that are my specialty.”

According to Oronella, vampires like her had the ability to control their looks as they wished. Particularly when they had enough blood, they had complete control over not only their faces but the clothes they were wearing, and even their voices and figures. She told me she wasn’t all that hungry that day, so she could change her outfit, and she turned around a number of times right there and showed me.

She went back from the trench coat to her original dress, then put on my robe, and then changed a number of times into clothes from the shop window before putting on the trench coat again.

By the way, there’s something about this that’s bothering me.

“I thought vampires didn’t show up in mirrors?”

I feel like there was something like that written in the book I read earlier.

“No, that’s not the case at all.”

“Wait, but—”

“By any chance, are you the type of person who thinks they’re an expert just because they read a book?”

I flung a piece of garlic at her.

“Ouch!”

But I see now.

It seems like she has some very special abilities.

“That trick seems like it has some promise when it comes to your new job...”

And so the curtain went up on my and Oronella’s little detective business.

We walked around town, and as we went down the road, we called out to every person— “Wait a second! I don’t want the blood of anyone except for cute girls!”

...We called out to *some* of the people we passed, focusing our attention

mainly on the cute girls. Since it wouldn't do Oronella much good if I spoke to everyone, she did most of the talking. She was going to have to do this on her own, after all, so this was like a rehearsal.

"Hello, young lady. How are you doing today?"

"Is there anything troubling you just now?"

"I recently started a detective business, and I'm available for hire if you like!"

That's pretty much how it went.

As she worked, I supported her.

"She's an amazing person who's super smart and can do anything!"

"There's really nothing that's troubling you? Cross your heart?"

"You'll be her first customer! How about it? We'll give you a good deal!"

I interjected like this at every opportunity. In short, I had nothing better to do.

We worked our way from girl to girl, and I wouldn't have been surprised if someone reported us as a couple of suspicious characters going around talking to every girl in the city that night.

However, as you can probably guess from the way I described it, our business activities did not go well at all.

"Huh? Gross."

Every single girl curtly turned down our proposition. They were completely unapproachable.

Are all the girls in this city so unfriendly?

No way, that can't be true. Every girl in the city, without exception, has looked at us like we're garbage. It can't be that every girl here is a cold person like that.

I think it's mostly Oronella's fault.

"Oh...? A detective? That's perfect! Actually, there is something I'm having trouble with!"

It was our good fortune that the fifth person we encountered was a strange girl who said she wanted us to take her case. Looking back and forth between

us, she asked, with a doubtful look in her eye, "...But detectives are expensive, right?"

This is our chance.

Oronella doesn't want money. She just wants you to give her a mouthful of blood.

"Oh-hoh-hoh. There's no charge."

So, wearing an overjoyed expression, Oronella answered the girl.

She answered her like this—

"You can pay me by letting me kiss you."

That was what she said.

"Huh? Gross."

Ultimately, even that kind girl looked at us like we were utter garbage, thanks to Oronella's creepy statement. Without hesitation, she said, "Never come near me again," before spitting at the curb and leaving.

"....."

I looked over at Oronella.

I suspect I looked at her like she was a piece of garbage, as we had been looked at countless times over the course of the night.

"Um, Oronella? Do you always ask for blood like that?"

"Back where I'm from, giving someone a kiss means sucking their blood."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah."

"You ought to stop saying that."

"You think?"

Oronella seemed to have an unfortunate habit of accidentally asking the girls who were walking down the road to let her kiss them when she ought to be asking them to let her suck their blood, so I started accepting jobs from the citizens at just the right moment, jumping in to interrupt her thoughtless words

and actions.

Fortunately, though people did give us puzzled looks and ask, “Give you my blood...? You kind of sound like a vampire, you know...” there were no more outright rejections or people saying, “Huh? Gross,” and spitting at us. We were able to take cases from citizens (mostly young women) without trouble.

Our first customer—

I called out to a young woman walking alone through the city at night.

“I’ve got a date, but I don’t really know where I’m going... Can you do something to help me?”

In short, she was lost. It was extremely sloppy of her not to know the location of her date and to get lost, but I supposed that was all right, since it meant we could take the job.

“Understood. So all we need to do is find the right bar, yeah?”

Oronella readily accepted the job.

Then the two of us split up and went hunting for the place where the woman was supposed to meet her date. We had her wait where she was, and we searched for the bar from the sky, me on my broom and Oronella using her wings.

Luckily, we found the place quickly.

“The bar is located straight down at the end of this street, and then turn left and it’s there. I’ll show you the way.”

Then Oronella took the client by the hand and started walking, escorting her to the bar. When they got there, the woman bowed and said, “Thank you! I never thought it would be this easy to find—”

Then she tilted her head questioningly. “By the way, how am I supposed to give you the blood to pay for this?”

How, you ask? Well, I suppose that for Oronella, the best way would be for her to chomp down on your neck and slurp out the blood, but—

“Oh, there’s no need to pay.”

But strangely enough, even though we had fulfilled the woman's request, even though she could get her blood, Oronella shook her head.

"Sucking the blood from the neck of a girl who was about to go on a date would sully my name as a detective, wouldn't it?" she asked with a smile.

Ultimately, Oronella's first job ended with a simple act of kindness. She escorted the girl to the bar for no reward.

As she saw her client off with a smile, she looked far removed from anything vampiric.

"Are you all right, Oronella?" I asked.

As soon as I did, she turned to me with a stiff expression on her face and said, "...I was trying to look cool."

"....."

"Elaina, let me kiss you instead—"

"I respectfully decline."

And so ended Oronella's first commission, which produced a good outcome but yielded no remuneration.

So then, our second customer—

"Actually, there's a female customer who has locked herself in our bathroom..."

We played it by ear and went into the bar. The woman shaking the shaker behind the counter hired us for the job with a frown.

Though she did express some bewilderment at the suggestion that we would like to receive blood as a payment.

"...How am I supposed to give you blood?"

I knew there was a possibility that if I didn't explain in detail beforehand, Oronella might try to look cool again and refuse payment while saying something strange, so I got out ahead of that and explained, "The detective over there has a terrific enthusiasm for getting blood directly from the necks of young, beautiful women. She'd like to get about one mouthful from your neck

in the event that we successfully complete the job.”

“Oh... That’s a little...embarrassing...”

The bartender’s cheeks flushed slightly. I wondered if she had been drinking.

Nevertheless, she didn’t reject the idea outright, but gave her consent. She was a good person.

We stood in front of the bar bathroom.

“Excuse us, are you okay in there?”

I started by knocking on the door a couple times.

“Bleeeh...”

From inside, a groan rang out like the cry of a wild beast.

Oh-hoh.

“Sounds pretty serious.”

Well then, how are we going to get her to come out of there?

“Elaina, I wonder if this is a case where I can make use of my detective sense?” Apparently, it was Oronella’s way as a vampire to say nonsensical things when struck by nonsensical moods in nonsensical situations.

“I can tell at a glance that this is a locked-room case. The door is locked, and it looks like there is only one entrance. Cries ring out from inside. I can detect signs that the person inside has been throwing up for quite a while. I’m afraid there’s no doubt she’s been doing some substantial drinking. Now then, when it comes to methods for getting her out of this locked room, off the top of my head, I can think of thirty-five different methods—”

“Oh?” The clinking sound of the lock breaking rang out from my hands.

Would you look at that? It seems like I carelessly destroyed the lock with a spell. My goodness, what rotten luck.

In the end, I easily unlocked the door without trying even one of her supposed thirty-five different methods.

“You’re so impatient!”

“Before a mage, a locked door is as strong as a scrap of paper.”

By the way, I completely fixed the lock afterward.

The person who was delivered from inside was a young-looking woman in her early twenties. Apparently, her boyfriend had recently broken up with her, and she had drowned herself in drink to try to forget the shock. As a result, the toilet bowl had ended up drowning in her effluents.

And so we recovered the female patron from the bathroom.

In that way, we easily completed our second job.

“Oh, there’s no need to pay.”

However, right after I thought it was time for her to get her promised reward, Oronella yet again said something nonsensical.

“It would be terrible for you to lose blood while you’re on the job, wouldn’t it? Please, keep your blood and keep your strength up.”

Her whole demeanor made it clear that she wanted to look cool.

Even though the bartender had already taken off her jacket and was pushing back her hair to expose her neck, despite all that, Oronella winked and said, “No charge.”

“Detective...”

I just stared at her.

She, on the other hand, let out a sigh before long, holding her belly as she suffered from hunger.

“...I did it again.”

“Will you ever learn?”

“I-I’m fine... Next time, for sure, I’m really going to get some blood.”

“Oh really, you are?” By that point, in my mind, my level of confidence in her detective business had sunk to the bowels of the earth, but even so, for the time being, I kept helping her.

We moved on to our third client—who we decided would be the last job we

accepted that night.

The client was the customer who had been continually vomiting in the bathroom earlier.

“Bleeehhhhhh...”

Allow me to translate.

She had been drinking alcohol at the bar all night, but she had carelessly forgotten her wallet at home, so she wanted us to go get it for her. That’s what she asked.

“I see. That is a problem. Allow me to solve it for you.”

Oronella accepted the woman’s request as she rubbed her back. The woman at the bar vomited again.

“Uuugh...thank you...thank youuu...”

“Look here, Toilet Lady. My job is to see to the happiness of others!” Oronella said something that I didn’t quite understand as she kept on rubbing the woman’s back.

“How about you save the happiness for after you get paid?”

Besides, she doesn’t look so happy.

“Bleeehhhhhh...”

She’s been puking this whole time.

When we talked to the client, whose body was wrecked by alcohol, she kept whining that she would be alone even if she went home, so she didn’t want to go, even as she told us the location of her house.

Her place was apparently rather close to the bar.

We borrowed her house key from her and headed for her home.

“Are you always like that?”

I had nothing better to do while we were walking, so I questioned Oronella.

She tilted her head in the same puzzled expression that I had on, as if she was imitating me, and asked, “Like what?”

I simplified the question a little bit.

“Do you always treat people kindly like that?” I asked.

“Oh, I wasn’t trying to be nice to her, but...” Oronella made a slightly displeased face. “Right now, I’m not particularly famished for blood, and besides, I’ve got you with me, Elaina. So it would be hard to say that I fulfilled their requests by myself. I’d feel kind of awkward accepting payment.”

“Uh-huh.”

You’re taking this very seriously.

But I had a feeling that her overly earnest or foolishly honest personality might be a little different from the way she usually behaved.

Sneaking in windows night after night to drink blood—now that I could understand because there was a reason behind it. She couldn’t help it when she was hungry.

But she had been committing one more crime in this city.

I had heard from the government official that many thefts had been committed in the city by a vampire.

Oronella was working overearnestly at her detective work, ostensibly to receive blood, but she always said she felt awkward accepting payment, even as she endured an empty stomach. Yet she had been stealing.

A very curious story indeed.

“.....” I was pondering the matter when we finally arrived at the house of the drunk woman at the bar. I stuck the key in the lock, and as I was turning it, I whirled around to ask her, “Come to think of it, Oronella, why have you been stealing things?”

Now that I had met her, and talked to her, and walked around with her like this, I suddenly couldn’t help but feel that such a rumor was, at the very least, somewhat implausible.

I was sure she had to have some profound reason for committing theft.

I couldn’t help believing in Oronella. She was a vampire, and I was a human,

but I trusted her, to a certain degree.

“Huh?”

She made a confused face in response to my question.

She didn't seem to be playing dumb; she just didn't seem to understand the meaning of my words. She wore a genuinely puzzled expression.

Then she said—

“But I've never stolen anything from a person's house.”

And then that was the exact moment when I opened the door.

Before I could respond to Oronella, I felt a stab of alarm. Something was off about the room before me. I stopped in my tracks with my mouth hanging open.

Inside the woman's house, where no one was supposed to be, the lights were turned on, and the sounds of someone rummaging around echoed quietly through the room. I was sure she had told us she lived alone, but for some reason, there were signs that someone was already in her house.

No, it wasn't just signs.

“...Ah.”

Inside the house.

The woman who turned around to look at us had her face screwed up in a very, very displeased-looking expression.

The room was a mess. The woman had turned around toward us with her hand still stuck in a drawer that was hanging open. I first noticed the necklaces and rings, then the obviously expensive-looking bags, watches, and other things that were piled up together. Clearly, she was just about to carry them out of the house.

On top of that, the thing that bothered me most of all was that the woman's appearance was curiously familiar.

There were fangs in her half-open mouth, and wings sprouted from the back of the dress she was wearing. She looked just like Oronella as I had seen her

earlier in the day.

In short, she looked just like a vampire.

She did, but—

“.....” I stared anxiously at the woman in the room.

“.....Huh?” Behind me, Oronella just stood there with a puzzled expression on her face.

Unlike a real vampire’s, the wings growing from the woman in front of our eyes were papier-mâché, and the fangs were so cheap-looking that they seemed like they would break right off the first time she bit down on them.

In short, she was a fraud.

“...Um.” At that point, the detective standing behind me made a very detective-like deduction. “Elaina, do you think that might be the vampire who’s been stealing things from people’s houses?”

“Seems that way, yes.”

“But no matter how you look at it, that’s an ordinary human.”

“Seems that way, yes.”

“Doesn’t that mean she’s just a burglar?”

To state it in a little more detail—

The ordinary burglar was dressed in a costume, pretending to be a vampire, and had been trying to pin her crimes on Oronella. That was what was going on.

Apparently, even the good-natured Oronella was not so good-natured as to smile and offer forgiveness when witnessing a burglary firsthand.

Oronella slipped past me and walked over to the vampire—or rather, to the burglar dressed as a vampire.

She transformed back from her detective’s trench coat into her vampiric dress.

Slowly, teasingly, she approached.

As Oronella walked over to her step-by-step, the blood drained from the

burglar's face.

“Ah, um, I'm...a real vampire, okay? I'm very scary! Got it? Okay? I'll suck your blood if you come any closer! I'll really do it! Ah, wait—”

By the way, Oronella hadn't eaten anything all day, and she had been rushing around working nonstop, so apparently she was a little hungry.

Given that—

I suppose it was probably unavoidable that she would help herself to a snack.

“Ohhh...thank you...thank youuu... I love you, Detective...! Marry me!”

After recovering the wallet from the house, we went back to the drunk woman and finished the job. Apparently, the client had been drinking water the whole time she waited for us, but even so, the lingering drunkenness seemed to be clouding her consciousness.

“Take this as thanks...,” the woman said, exposing her own neck. “You can have all of me...if you like?” She collapsed into Oronella's arms as if surrendering herself.

“Huh, wait...are you okay?”

The woman who had foisted herself onto Oronella had her eyes closed and was obviously half-asleep. In fact, she was already snoring.

Tomorrow, she most likely won't remember what she did at the bar.

“.....”



After politely fixing the drunk lady's disarrayed clothing, Oronella set her down and stood immediately back up.

Then she said—

“Oh, there's no need to pay.”

Even though the client was already in dreamland, she made a show of it like always, but at the same time, licking her own lips, she added, “I already got paid.”



The following day.

Around sunset.

I headed to the offices of the city government.

“My goodness, Miss Witch. This is quite the accomplishment! The vampire you caught yesterday—the one who was just a burglar in costume—it seems she's been burgling in this city for a long time now. We discovered quite a lot of stolen goods in her house.”

Once the sun came up, I turned in the burglar we had encountered the night before to the government office.

After an investigation by the government office, it became clear that the burglar had lately been committing her crimes dressed as a vampire. The culprit testified, “I heard that a vampire had shown up recently, so I figured I wouldn't be caught stealing if I looked like a vampire.”

In fact, things had surely gone better than the burglar expected, since groundless suspicion of theft had fallen on Oronella, who had been going around town sneaking into people's houses night after night and sucking their blood.

Honestly. What an awful person!

“By the way, that burglar was a little anemic when you brought her in. Did something happen?” the government official asked, tilting his head questioningly.

“Hmm?” I tilted my head the same way, feigning ignorance.

Then Oronella, who was sitting beside me, chuckled slightly bashfully. “Eh-heh-heh. I drank a little too much,” she said. Her skin was so glossy, you would never think she was a venerable ninety-two years old.

Oronella had not only grown up in the remote countryside, she had been raised in a cave far away from human habitation. And as long as she had blood, she could change everything, even her clothes, at will, and on top of that, didn’t even need to eat food. So taking that into consideration, she didn’t have any great need for money or material goods.

There was basically no reason for her to commit a string of burglaries.

But since neither I nor the people of this city had any detailed knowledge about the habits of real vampires like Oronella, we had totally mistaken her for the culprit in the burglaries.

We did something inexcusable, didn’t we?

“We are terribly sorry, Miss Vampire.”

The official sitting across from us bowed his head deeply. “The residents of this city seem to have behaved very rudely. I really wonder how we can make it up to you...” His words were evasive.

“This isn’t necessarily an apology, but—” As he spoke, the official pulled several gold coins and two pieces of paper from his breast pocket. “This is your reward for a job well done—plus two passes to a luxury hotel that is said to maybe be one of the top three in the whole country. It’s got an attached restaurant as well, so by all means, the two of you please relax and rest your wings.”

A luxury hotel with a luxury restaurant attached?

Luxury...

That’s got a nice ring to it... Wait, but—

“You’re doing an awful lot for us, aren’t you?”

I tilted my head questioningly, and the official smiled, looking a little bashful.

“Yes. This incident has turned me into a fan of Lady Vampire.”

“Isn’t that abuse of public office?”

“So I shouldn’t give the passes to you after all?”

Casting a sidelong glance at the puzzled official, I turned to look at the person right beside me.

“Huh...? Is it okay for me to accept something like this? Really...?”

There was Oronella, bewildered by the money and the luxury hotel passes that had suddenly been handed to her, flustered and unsure whether it was really okay for her to take them.

“Well, I guess it’s all right, isn’t it?”



That very day, we immediately went over to the luxury hotel, and while we were there, we made our way to the luxury restaurant.

“Hey, chef. I’d like to have some fresh blood.”

As soon as we sat down, Oronella snapped her fingers and made this loud declaration. Wearing a slightly bewildered expression, the waitress paid no attention to what Oronella had said and asked me, “Are you ready to order?”

I went ahead and ordered the set course.

“Hey, chef. I’d like to have some fresh blood.”

Oronella snapped her fingers again, not at all bothered by being ignored.

I let out a sigh and requested, “Excuse me, could I ask you to severely undercook her food? And please prepare it without any garlic.”

“Certainly.” The waitress looked a little puzzled, but she took the order, which must have seemed rather ridiculous, and went straight to the back of the house.

“Well, it’s probably not your very first preference, but I think it will be pretty tasty.”

This is a three-star restaurant, after all.

Oronella nodded at me and said in a lively voice, “I’m looking forward to it! To tell the truth, I actually haven’t eaten a thing since yesterday. Do you know why

that is, Elaina?”

“I’m guessing because people view it as a problem when you suck their blood.”

“It’s because I was looking forward to this dinner!”

“No, I bet it’s because people view it as a problem when you suck their blood.”

If you broke into someone’s home through the window again after what happened yesterday, they might think, Huh? This vampire is a bad person after all, isn’t she? I bet that even though you felt the urge to drink people’s blood, you restrained yourself and came here.

But just as you would expect at a luxury restaurant, we had barely gotten into this trivial conversation when dishes were carried one after another to our table.

With pleasure, we enjoyed the new flavors that arrived back-to-back, and after making short work of the food, we began to have a pleasant conversation.

“So, I’ve been thinking about it. I’m a vampire detective, right?”

“Yes you are.”

“I think detectives really do need sidekicks, Elaina.”

“Unfortunately, I am a traveler, so it’s impossible for me to become your sidekick.”

“...I could give you my meat?”

“If you’re trying to bribe me, I have no intention of accepting.”

Not to mention that it’s basically raw, isn’t it? I definitely don’t want it.

“If you won’t become my sidekick, then who am I supposed to pair up with from now on to do my work?”

“As an experiment, how about you try putting your hand in a puppet or something?”

“You’re not even trying, are you?”

“This meat is delicious, isn’t it?”

“Want mine?”

“Nope.”

Speaking between bites, we finished our meals in a flash. After I was done eating, I looked at my watch and realized that a fair amount of time had passed since we arrived at the restaurant.

Apparently, I had been enjoying myself.

After our meal, tea was brought to the table.

“That was so good...” Looking idly around the restaurant, I let out a sigh, then suddenly turned my eye on Oronella.

She had just started her work as a detective in this city, but— “How long are you planning to stay here?” I tilted my head to one side. She seemed to be a wanderer as well, so it wasn’t difficult to imagine that she was not planning to remain in the city forever.

“Hmm, good question...” Oronella put a finger to her lips and let her gaze wander.

“For now, I think I’ll be here for about another month,” she answered. *“I still haven’t found a single clue leading to my little sister, after all,”* she added.

Right, right, of course.

“I wonder where your sister could be?”

“Seriously.”

Something had happened not that long ago.

About a year before all this.

There had been a young woman passing day after boring day in the vampire community.

The younger sister who had once listened to her grandfather’s old stories alongside Oronella had developed a terrible longing for the city, or rather, for the world in which humans dwelled.

“I’m getting out of this backwoods town!” she’d said as she left the vampire village.

Her big sister, Oronella, had apparently given her fanciful younger sister a very chilly look, but she had never expected her to actually leave their hometown.

Their parents had been terribly worried about her when she suddenly ran away.

“Seriously, what could that girl be thinking...?”

“Unbelievable...”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh, oh, youth!”

Though it was largely the grandfather’s foolish stories that had caused things to go that way, he had adopted the same carefree attitude as always.

“Well, I’m sure she’ll come back after a little while.”

Oronella told me that she, too, had not taken the situation very seriously.

But even after several months had gone by, her little sister hadn’t come back.

“Dad! She hasn’t come back at all, has she?! How are you going to fix this? I can’t believe you!” The girls’ mother was furious.

“Hoh-hoh-hoh, I bet she’s draining one girl after another right now in the city!” Their grandfather hadn’t changed.

Eventually, when there were no signs that her little sister was going to come home, Oronella had been recruited to bring back the runaway.

So for six months, Oronella told me, she had been traveling from place to place, searching for her younger sister. But everywhere, they had thrown garlic at her, and she hadn’t been able to look for her sister properly.

Dear me, what a quandary.

“Honestly, where could she have gotten off to?”

“What did you say she’s been doing for work?”

“Mm...if I’m not mistaken, she’s been doing detective work in this city. At

least, that's the rumor I heard, but—"

Oronella rested her chin idly in her hands as she looked around the restaurant.

That's when it happened.

All the lights in the restaurant were shut off.

When I looked around the room to see what on earth was going on, the flickering light of small candles appeared, being carried over to a window seat along with a cheerful little song.

"...Miss Witch, what's that?"

Oh, apparently she's not familiar with the customs of the human world.

"It's a celebration cake." A waiter was carrying the cake over to the window seat. "Probably an anniversary cake or something, for a couple."

Good for them.

I set down my after-dinner tea and clapped my hands, joining in with the applause that had started to resound sparsely through the room. In the seat across from me, Oronella followed suit, clapping to congratulate the couple.

As soon as she started clapping—

"Kyaaaaaahhh!"

From the back of the restaurant—right next to the toilets—someone's scream rang out.

"...What's going on?"

I cocked my head.

Then, when the lights in the restaurant were turned back on, I found out.

"....."

"....."

Oronella and I were both at a loss when we saw her.

Behind the woman collapsed on the floor—we spotted a lone young woman looking out at the restaurant from the area near the toilets.

While the woman whose clothes were covered in wine was panicking and making a fuss, the other young woman disappeared into the bathroom. I only saw her for an instant, but she had a strange look to her and appeared to be in her mid-twenties. Her light brown hair and red eyes were very distinctive, and I couldn't help but notice that she resembled Oronella, who was sitting right beside me.

In other words—

“Wasn't that your sister just now?”

“That was her.”

I stared blankly toward the toilets, and before long, the girl with light brown hair—that is, Oronella's little sister—suddenly popped back out.

She had donned a hunting cap on top of her light brown hair. Wrapped around her body was an extremely long trench coat. She was dressed in true detective fashion, and for some reason, there were puppets perched on both her hands.

Apparently, she had used her vampiric ability to transform. But— “Why do you suppose she changed into a detective's outfit?”

“Maybe she intends to make some deductions or something?”

“But she's obviously the culprit, right?”

“She sure is.”

“By the way, why does she have puppets on both hands?”

“She's kind of a weird girl.”

Uh, yeah, I could tell that just by looking at her for a minute.

It was obvious at a glance that she herself was the very culprit who had assaulted the wine-soaked woman on the floor. But at the same time, it was also clear that she had every intention of presenting some preposterous deduction and then running away.

Despite all that, needless to say, there would probably be trouble if she encountered Oronella then and there.

No helping it, then.

So I stood up—

“Oronella, wouldn’t you fancy some exercise after that meal?” I said to my stunned companion. “Please transform for me. Into a puppet.”

“...Can you do ventriloquism?”

“I can’t, so please talk normally.”

“Wait, but if I talk, she might know me by my voice...”

“Ah, then maybe you should use a falsetto voice?”

“Uh...”

Although she was hesitant, Oronella did ultimately transform into a puppet, asking, “I wonder if this will do?” in her falsetto voice. She was unexpectedly enthusiastic about the whole thing.

I don’t suppose I have to tell you what happened after that. I solved the case, and the detective wound up working in the restaurant to pay off her debts.

And I watched the whole spectacle intently, accompanied by the puppet on my right hand.

To make a long story short—

Not only do birds of a feather flock together, this bird had actually managed to call her family member to her side.



CHAPTER 6

Beasts

Five

In the course of my travels, I visited a city called the Forest Capital.

“.....”

There, I witnessed a singularly dreadful spectacle.

A lone young girl, shabby in appearance, sank down to the ground and trembled. It was in the city square. A crowd of people watched the girl's behavior intently.

“Ah...”

Right in front of the girl, an enormous beast stood growling. Apparently, it was a species of animal that lived mainly in that region, known as the kinomianis.

It resembled a huge wolf, and it was tall as the roofs of the houses lining the streets around it.

Standing firmly in the city street with its four legs, the creature brought the tip of its nose in close and looked down at the girl. Its huge mouth was large enough to easily swallow up a little girl, and its sharp fangs meant certain death for anyone caught in its jaws.

The repulsive beast was there in the very center of a human city.

“The kinomianis are perfectly able to understand what we say.”

From within the crowd—

An old man standing near me explained, “They're obedient to us, they follow any order we give them, and they would never betray us. Those creatures are much more trustworthy than humans.”

When I looked, I could see that the kinomianis in front of us had a collar around its neck. It was tied down to the brick road with chains, and as far as I

could see, it would have been difficult for it to get close to us.

The city residents watching the girl and the beast from the safety zone where its fangs couldn't reach were all smiling, anticipating what was meant to happen next.

Apparently, this was one of the few means of entertainment in this city.

There were no other cities to speak of nearby, only forest. There was one tiny settlement in the forest, but they didn't have the kind of relationship with the city that would enable proper communication or trade. Also, this city did not have very advanced technology.

In this city, there was barely anything for people to enjoy.

So people crowded around the little girl, sitting on the ground before the beast. Some were drinking, or chatting pleasantly, or shouting at the beast to spur it on.

I had slipped in among the residents and was watching the spectacle.

The old man asked me, "Whaddaya think, Lady Witch?"

I guess he's asking what I think about this city, where people get excited about this kind of event.

I just shook my head.

"...I don't think it's right."

But I knew that whatever I thought, it didn't make any difference.

As if responding to the crowd's encouragement, the beast let out a roar and opened its huge mouth. Its enormous mouth, full of sharp fangs.

Then it lunged for the girl—

One

"Oh, there's a village out here!"

Earlier that day, I had chanced upon a small village in the forest.

As I was steering my broom through the trees, my nose picked up on the scent of some kind of richly flavorful bread mingling with the fragrance of the

forest.

“What’s this? Where could that scent be coming from?” I let my broom drift this way and that and eventually wound up at the village.

Every home was beautifully integrated with the natural setting. Each of the little cabins that were built nestled in between the trees stood quietly in the forest, as if they were hiding from something. That was probably why I didn’t notice them until I got quite close.

That said, there was no hiding the smell of food.

“...Hello?”

The atmosphere about the place was one of quiet seclusion, withdrawn far from human habitation. But as a traveler, I was curious, so I alighted from my broom and took it upon myself to wander around.

The village was eerily quiet.

Even though it was the middle of the day, there were no people anywhere, and even when I stole a peek in through a window, all I could see were half-eaten dishes of food, books lying open to be read, and partially folded laundry. Nothing but traces, as if everyone had slipped out in a hurry.

My goodness, did everyone in this village disappear into thin air right before I showed up? Or maybe they all ran away?

“.....”

Although I was dressed in my black robe and pointed hat, a getup that tended to put people on their guard, I was fairly certain my appearance wouldn’t make people run away without even meeting me.

If anything, I was more likely to be dismissed, either because of my age or because of how I looked.

“...Is that really true?”

“Yes, I told you—”

“I can’t believe it, at a time like this—”

After I had been walking through the village for a short while, I spotted some

human figures.

My worries were unfounded. I see now that they didn't run away after all.

The people of the village were in an uproar. They had gathered together in a circle and were whispering to one another fearfully.

It didn't feel as if I could speak to them. All of them were wearing very serious expressions, and I could see a little girl slumped on the mossy ground, sobbing.

This is no ordinary situation.

Hard to say anything...

I think I should just quietly turn back around and take my leave.

Immediately after I spun around—

“Who's over there?”

—a voice called out to me from behind.

I turned back around again to look. In other words, I made one full revolution.

“Oh, hello. I am a traveler,” I said, raising both hands to emphasize that I was not a suspicious character.

The person who had spoken to me was a young woman.

She looked to be about my age. She had wavy black hair and dignified features that made her look strong-willed.

And she was dressed in a robe.

She was a mage.

“I see you are one of us,” she said as she walked over to me. “What is your business?”

“Ah, well...I didn't actually come here on any particular business...”

I just happened to come here by chance. If you must know, I was drawn in by the scent of bread. But it's only natural that you would be suspicious. Now then, I'm clearly intruding, so I'll just be leaving immediately—

“Right. That's just perfect, then.”

The woman before me nodded firmly.

What do you mean? That it's perfect that a person with free time on her hands showed up?

Even though I didn't exactly get a warm welcome in the overly quiet village, she gave me the indication that she was quite glad I had happened to arrive there.

After exchanging looks with the other villagers, the woman asked, "I wonder if you would lend us a hand helping someone right now? Of course, we would reward you for your help."

Right now?

"That's a very sudden request..."

"Someone's life depends upon it."

That must mean a very urgent situation has arisen in this village.

"...I don't know whether I'll be of any help, okay?"

When I looked at the crowd behind the woman, I could see that all the other people were dressed in the same type of robes. Apparently, everyone in this village was a mage.

It seemed like they should have been able to manage with so many people who could use magic.

But the woman nodded firmly again.

"Right now, we need a mage with true strength, even just one—"

Then she said, without dismissing me or looking down on me, "I can tell by looking at the brooch on your chest. Your abilities are the best thing we have to rely on right now."

So what in the world had happened to put the village in turmoil?

The mage with the black hair who had spoken to me—the woman who called herself Quori—laid the situation out simply.

According to her—

“When spring comes, the ferocious beasts start to appear around our village.”

She told me that they were called kinomianis and that they were enormous wolflike creatures. In the spring when the weather warmed up, the kinomianis awoke from their winter hibernation and became active. They were very, very hungry after their long slumber, and they would savagely attack anyone they encountered.

Consequently, the mages who lived in this village tried their best not to leave their homes during the spring. They paid careful attention whenever they went out hunting and had agreed to always travel in groups.

In spite of that—

“...That girl’s mother is out in the forest alone right now.”

Quori was pointing to the girl who was crouched on the ground, her shoulders quaking. Her hair was blond. Her eyes, moist with tears, were golden as well. She appeared to be about five years old. She was still young, and she kept mumbling, “Mama, mama...”

“Why did she go, if she knew it was dangerous?”

My question seemed like a very reasonable one.

Quori cast her eyes downward and answered, “This morning, a group of adults from the village set out hunting. That girl’s mother—her name is Eren—she was among them.”

“How many people went hunting?”

“Four. But only three came back.”

“.....”

“According to what I heard from the three people who came back, apparently they ran into a kinomianis on their way, and everyone scattered. They were in a group of four, but they knew that wasn’t enough to keep everyone from getting hurt.”

According to Quori, Eren was a brave woman.

In order to save her three companions, she had made herself into a decoy and

separated from the group.

The three people who came back had immediately reported in detail what had occurred. However, no matter how long they waited for her, Eren the decoy hadn't returned.

In short—

She was still out there, alone in the forest where the kinomianis was prowling.

"Eren told us to run..."

"I'm sorry... If only we had stood our ground..."

"P-please...! Please let us help search for her!"

Those must be the three who came back.

It was a group of three young men. They were making frantic appeals to the other villagers. I had never met her, but I could tell Eren must have been highly respected in the village.

"Enough. You all must be exhausted. Right now, everyone else who's able will search for Eren. You three mind the children."

One of the adults from the village addressed the three young men, calming them.

The fact that Eren had not yet returned to the village meant that she was either in a situation where she couldn't move or that she had already fallen victim to the beast.

That much was still unclear.

However—

"In any case, it will definitely be too late if we don't set out looking immediately, isn't that right?"

"Yeah—"

And it sounds like you've decided you need as many people as you can get in order to split up and search for one woman in the wide forest.

"We would be grateful for your help," Quori said. "To prepare for the worst, I

want to have as many companions who can use magic as possible.”

Prepare for the worst.

I could tell there was a possibility we might have to do battle against the kinomianis.

“.....”

I looked past Quori, gazing out over the village.

I saw the young boys and girls of the village who depended on the adults.

I saw the adults, who were deeply troubled.

I saw the sobbing child slumped on the ground.

So I said with a smile, “I’ve never seen this creature you call the kinomianis before. I think I’d like to see what kind of animal it is.”

Two

By the way, the woman named Quori seemed to be the most capable person in the village.

“If you find the kinomianis, send up a red flare, and if you find Eren, send up a green one, got it? I’ve told your companions the same thing as well.”

It seemed appropriate for the two of us to pair up. She undoubtedly had the best abilities in the village, and I had the credentials, though it wasn’t clear whether I had the right abilities.

When it came to searching for someone, it was best to have a lot of people searching, but when it came to avoiding danger, it was best to have a lot of people working together.

The formation of the search parties in the village had been done without counting the two of us. After forming groups, the others had set out to search the forest in groups of at least five people, dispersing in all directions.

We two were responsible for the area to the north of the village.

It was a little gloomy despite being the middle of the day, and the whole area was covered in moss, which added to the spine-tingling atmosphere.

“This is a creepy forest, huh?”

“Yeah. No one goes into the forest except for the real weirdos,” Quori replied.

“.....”

“Why did you come here, I wonder?” she asked.

“Should I not have?”

I looked over and saw her shaking her head slowly.

“No, I’m glad for your help.” But she continued, “I’m sure you didn’t think there were people living in a place like this?”

“Well, sure...you’re right.”

Since I’m a wanderer, traveling from place to place as the mood takes me, I guess the reason I wound up here was really just a whim. But—

“Are the people of your village hiding from something?”

I hadn’t seen any conclusive evidence, but that was the impression I got.

The many little modest huts, standing among the trees of the forest in startling silence. The residents whispering softly to one another, holding their breath in the middle of the eerie forest.

It was as if they were frightened of something.

“Are you out here to escape from the kinomianis?”

“No—if we were trying to escape from them, we would fortify the village more. We don’t even have fences, or a gate. Out here, in a place like this, if a kinomianis attacks you, there’s no escaping your fate.”

“...Yet you don’t build fences, or a gate.”

“The kinomianis are a threat to the village for sure, but what we truly fear is something completely different.”

“What’s that?”

Then, after we had walked a little farther, she came to a halt.

In the middle of the forest.

In that spot, there were houses nestled in among the trees, exactly like the village we had just been in. All of them were obviously dilapidated, covered with moss, as if they had been abandoned long, long ago and never visited by people since.

As she touched the moss—

“It’s humans,” she said. “We’re afraid of humans.”

According to Quori, the people of her village traced back their origins to a group of refugees who had lost their homes due to war. Without a homeland, they had wandered from place to place seeking a new safe haven.

But the grief they had borne was real.

The neighboring lands of the ancient past had persecuted mages.

They were feared for having special powers. There were even some people who scorned them and called them beasts. No matter where they traveled, other people always looked at the mages with cold eyes.

Very rarely, there was a place that welcomed them kindly. But even in those countries, the people would always end up trying to take advantage of the mages’ powers to carry out reforms, or spur advances in medicine, or win a war.

The mages were tired out.

That was an old, old story.

“Then the last place we traveled to was this forest—so I’ve been told,” Quori said. “Our ancestors stopped trusting in other people. So they decided to live in the middle of this forest.”

For better or worse, there were repulsive *beasts* prowling through the forest, and on top of that, it was difficult to see very far, so you could get lost just by walking around.

In the middle of this forest, which only real weirdos would enter, the mages thought they could find peace.

“But even then, people would still come. There were people who would walk into the forest, trying to contact us. Whenever that happened, we moved our

dwellingings.”

“.....”

I stared at the decaying village.

Undoubtedly, this, too, was a village that had been abandoned because a person had happened to come calling.

“...What a waste.”

After they went to the trouble of building a whole village.

“Yeah. But there’s no helping it. In order to keep from being used, we have to cut off all connections.”

“From people who might be bad, right?”

“Yeah.”

“...But I don’t think everyone who visits your village is necessarily a bad person.”

“Probably not.”

In fact, I—leaving aside the question of whether or not I was a bad person—I hadn’t found my way there looking to take advantage of Quori and her people. In fact, it seemed like very few humans would come to a place like this to try to recruit the mages.

“But we still don’t see other people.”

The story about being used was decades in the past.

I felt like there was no longer any need for them to keep living their lives shut away in the forest.

But Quori shook her head.

“I’m certain this is the only way for us to live in peace.”

So every day, they lived quiet lives, in fear of something.

“We love our fellow villagers like true family. But—”

She told me that whenever one of them was left out in the forest alone, the whole village went searching for them.

Then Quori looked up into the sky above the gloomy forest.

When I looked, I saw a red flare in the air.

“I wonder why things never go well for us?”

Along with a green flare.

Three

By the time Quori and I rode our brooms over to the source of the lights, there was already a great crowd of mages gathered there.

Every one of them had their wands in their hands and deeply held resentment in their eyes.

“That’s the one...! It killed Eren...!”

The kinomianis, already surrounded on all sides by the mages, glowered at them and growled. It bared its fangs menacingly.

Beside it lay a wand and a woman’s shoe.

“...Eren.”

Quori seemed to know perfectly well who those things belonged to.

Beside me, she sank down hard to the ground.

The other mages were firing off streams of spells, channeling their anger at seeing one of their own killed. Even before the two of us had arrived, they must have started their onslaught.

The kinomianis’s body was already filthy with blood, and its enormous face and body were pierced all over with many weapons.

And yet it didn’t bark at us, and it didn’t charge. It just kept its mouth tightly closed and growled.

“No mercy...! Kill it! Everyone, hit it with every spell you have!”

One of the mages shouted, and immediately afterward the light from their wands concentrated on the kinomianis. They hit it with flames, lightning bolts, and all sorts of weapons. They attacked the kinomianis with murderous fury.

In the midst of it all, I hadn’t pulled out my wand.

“.....”

That was because the kinomianis was wounded all over and was being blasted with so many spells that it didn't have a single opening to make any kind of counterattack. I didn't really feel like it was necessary for me to assist the other mages.

“...Oh, right, I'd better attack, too—”

So I looked at Quori, who was getting unsteadily to her feet.

“...Wait a second.”

I stopped her.

I certainly wasn't feeling any pity for the kinomianis.

But there was no reason for Quori to stand up.

“It's already dead.”

The kinomianis had died on its feet before anyone noticed, without attacking the mages even once.

The light had gone out of its eyes, which were still open.

And from its bloody mouth, which was hanging loosely open— —fell the corpse of a woman.

Six

“Kyaaaaaahhh!”

In the Forest Capital. Right in the center of town, the shabby looking little girl shrieked and was gobbled up headfirst by the kinomianis.

Cheers went up from all the surrounding citizens. They had all been looking forward to the moment when the girl got eaten. That's why all of them were smiling.

That's because this was the sole form of entertainment in their city.

“...This doesn't seem right,” I muttered again.

The old man beside me smiled. “Now, don't say that. The next part is worth seeing. Watch.”

He pointed. The kinomianis looked like it was chewing, then it spit the little girl out.

“Kyaaaaaah!”

The shabbily dressed little girl flew gently through the air as the people of the city cheered for joy. She landed in the fountain on the other side of the plaza.

The fountain splashed, and the smiling little girl reappeared.

“One more time! Do it again!”

The girl climbed out of the fountain and, dripping wet, ran over to the kinomianis and threw her arms around it.

Following her lead, other children, dressed in *shabby clothes that were dirty but otherwise intact*, rushed out of the crowd and gathered around the kinomianis.

“No! It’s my turn next!”

“It’s mine!”

“Wait! But I’ve only been thrown once so far!”

The adults watched the spectacle with naked amusement, smiling.

Apparently, this was the primary diversion in their city, where there was little entertainment.

“The kinomianis is a clever creature that loves children, and apparently they have a behavior of holding their young in their mouths to protect them when they’re raising them,” explained the old man by my side. “Even here, we’ve only recently begun to understand the life cycle and habits of the kinomianis. Before, we were frightened of them because of their repulsive outward appearance, and we scattered poison in the forest so they wouldn’t come near the city, and avoided them at all costs, but after some investigation, the kinomianis’s high intelligence and peaceful disposition became clear.”

“Has one ever killed a person by mistake?”

“Never once, as far as we know,” the old man answered. “Once, an injured soldier of ours encountered a kinomianis in the woods, and he was frightened.

But even when he stabbed it with his sword, far from attacking him back, the kinomianis held the soldier in its mouth and carried him back to our territory. It did that with the sword still sticking into its shoulder.”

“.....”

“That was when we realized that the creatures make good neighbors.”

So they had investigated and learned more about their intellect and disposition.

This city that had previously tried to exterminate the kinomianis cleaned up the poison they had scattered throughout the forest and then actively worked to invite the kinomianis into their territory, the man told me.

“So then, what happened to your city?” I asked.

“Just as you can see. We chose to live with the kinomianis.”

Then the old man, looking pleased at all the children’s smiles, said, “Persecution is always born of ignorance, after all.”

Four

Eren’s remains were wrapped in cloth and carried back to the village.

She must have been just like family to everyone in the village. Everyone was crying, and everyone was mourning her death.

Quori was no exception.

“If only we had set out sooner to look for her...Eren would be...”

She hung her head, her shoulders trembling, and looked down at the cloth covered in blood.

“Mama...Mama...! Why...?”

Eren’s little girl clung to the dead body.

It seemed like the village was wrapped in an even deeper silence than when I had first arrived.

The girl looked at the villagers, her eyes swollen with tears.

“Why did Mama die...?”

It was a question no one wanted to answer.

The villagers looked at one another.

Who should answer her? What should they tell her? In the long silence that followed, Quori finally approached the girl and stroked her soft blond hair.

And then—

“I’m sorry—if we had gotten there sooner, your mother might not have been a victim. So if you must blame someone, blame us.”

After saying that, she told the girl—

She told her that her mother was—

“She was a victim of the beasts.”



CHAPTER 7

Junk Princess

WELCOME, CUSTOMER. MAY I TAKE YOUR ORDER?

Flower Garden Theomea.

As I was gazing at the menu in a terrace seat at a café in that city, a waiter walked over to me and asked for my order.

I looked up at the waiter and answered with an extremely conservative order. “For now, I’ll have a coffee,” I said.

The waiter bowed politely and left my table. Not a moment later, a different waiter appeared carrying a tray. It was surprisingly quick service. I wondered if they had poured the coffee the moment the first waiter had taken my order.

With a clatter, the waiter set my coffee on the table, and along with it, a newspaper.

...A newspaper?

“But I didn’t ask for this?” I said, implying there must have been some mistake. I held the newspaper right back out to the waiter.

But the waiter looked down at the newspaper and bowed. WE PROVIDE THEM AS A FREE SERVICE.

Oh-hoh, a free service, you say?

“What a nice service.”

IT’S OUR PLEASURE.

Then the waiter went away.

Even though it was still early in the morning, there were a fair number of people in the café. A man relaxing and killing time before work. Elderly people who really just had too much time on their hands. And a witch who just happened to visit this city during her travels—*that’s me*.

“.....”

I had nothing else to do, and I was starting to get bored, so I went ahead and opened the newspaper that had been given to me. Apparently, there was some incident that had been agitating the whole city for quite some time. The whole front page was filled with not-very-good news.

SEVERAL NEW-TYPE MAGICAL TURRETS DEPLOYED TO WASTE DISPOSAL FACILITY

The article explained that these new magical defense guns were configured to attack immediately whenever a human being approached, meaning that even if someone just approached the disposal facility by mistake, there was a danger of casualties.

Many people objected to the idea of automated magical turrets that might kill people, and there was a lot of criticism. The government claimed they were necessary to keep people from stealing the waste from the disposal facility and had not indicated any intention of removing the turrets. The cutting-edge magical guns had already been installed at the disposal facility, which meant that even as I was reading about them in the paper, someone trying to get into the magical doll disposal facility would be faced with certain death—probably that's what it meant.

There was one single reason why the government was taking such forceful measures.

The events that led to these changes were considerately outlined in the newspaper article.

About one month earlier—

There had been an incident in which one of the magical dolls responsible for protecting the waste disposal facility had malfunctioned, gone on a rampage, and injured a person. The magical dolls in Flower Garden Theomea looked human, but they were not human. It's worth noting that they were built to follow human orders. They were animated by magic and were compelled by magic to follow human commands and to keep working until they fall apart.

Despite that, the magical doll at the waste disposal facility had disobeyed orders.

Consequently, her fate was to be destroyed.

Completely dismantled, leaving no trace.

“.....”

Though it was small, the newspaper had printed a photo of the scene.

“...Halverie.”

As I touched the photo of the wreckage, I stared at the final form of the girl I had spent time with.

The last picture of the girl who had done nothing but protect the waste disposal facility for many long months and years.



One day, about a month earlier...

In a forest with broad-leaved trees growing thickly enough to blot out the sky, their swaying leaves blocking the sun’s rays, I concealed myself in the foliage, peering at distant scenery through my binoculars.

The place I was looking at was bright.

There was a lot of rubbish, enough to cover the ground, and flowers poked their way up through the trash. I saw artificial arms and legs, torsos and heads, and guns, swords, and shields. There were also all sorts of everyday goods like plates, phonographs, books, chairs, and the like. I was looking at a graveyard of human-made objects that had reached the end of their useful lives. At the same time, lots of flowers were threading up between the objects, swaying in the breeze.

“...Found her,” I whispered, shifting my binoculars a little.

I had gone to that waste disposal facility with a single purpose.

That purpose had come from a poster I happened to notice at an inn in a nearby city.

THERE IS A BROKEN MAGICAL DOLL IN OUR CITY’S WASTE DISPOSAL FACILITY. THIS MAGICAL DOLL WAS DEPLOYED THIRTY YEARS AGO TO PROTECT THE FACILITY FROM THIEVES BUT HAS BECOME DAMAGED OVER TIME AND MUST BE DISPOSED OF.

But when a new model of magical doll and an official from the government had gone to dispose of the old doll, it had refused disposal—and of all things—

had pointed a gun at the human.

So they wanted to enlist the help of travelers and mages in destroying the problem doll.

At the bottom of the poster was the government's seal and a map to the waste disposal facility.

The city that had issued the request was called Flower Garden Theomea. At the time, it was a place I had yet to visit. As far as I could tell by looking at the map, it didn't seem to be that far from the place I was staying.

And what drew my eye more than anything was the reward for completing the task.

"A hundred gold pieces...!"

That was big money. I was surprised. So surprised, I even squealed a little.

Is that for real? Can I really get that much money? Sounds fishy. There has to be some kind of catch, right?

"....."

With those thoughts in mind, who should casually show up at the waste disposal facility the following day but me?

At the end of the day, I was lured in by the aroma of a tasty little moneymaking scheme, huh...?

Sure enough, there was something that looked like a magical doll standing in the waste disposal facility amid the flowers and old junk.

It was holding two machine guns, one in each hand. Its body was surprisingly slim, but it had a curious physique that was neither male nor female. The doll was white, and it didn't seem very human.

For starters, it wasn't wearing a scrap of clothing.

And it didn't have a head.

The strange doll had its back to me, among the junk.

"...That's probably the magical doll, right?"

Unfortunately, the information I had been given hadn't included the doll's characteristics. Actually, all the request had said was that they wanted someone to destroy the magical doll that was at the waste disposal facility.

Yeah, but I think if there's someone standing in this garbage dump, I can be pretty sure it's the broken magical doll that was described in the request—

"Huh?"

I blinked, doubting my own eyes, and let out a short shriek.

The magical doll, which I had been sure was facing away from me, had turned toward me. It hadn't moved its legs, just whirled its torso around from the waist up.

"...Huh?"

What's going on?

By the time I had that thought, the doll had already turned its machine guns on me. The attack had begun.

The bullets whizzed toward me, scattering the flowers and rubbish that was spread over the ground.

Ah, so this thing is broken. Definitely broken, beyond a doubt. And I haven't even done anything yet.

This must be the broken magical doll that Flower Garden Theomea wants handled, no question about it.

As I jumped out from between the trees, I took my wand in hand and conjured up some magical energy. I formed an improvised shield of solidified magic at the tip of my wand. The barrier repelled every bullet, protecting me. The shots ricocheted off of my shield and hit the trees behind me, sending splinters flying.

The forest was thrown into commotion by the echoing din, and the birds flew off to escape.

Even so, the hail of bullets didn't let up.

"....."

The magical doll didn't say a word—it hadn't even turned to face me properly. But it was obvious that the doll had identified me, a person who had been poking around the garbage dump, as an enemy.

Even as I ran away, trying to escape the gunfire, the doll kept following me with only its upper half turned nimbly toward me. I trampled trash and flowers underfoot as I ran, but the doll kept on firing, unchecked.

Since I was under constant attack, I didn't have the chance to make a counterattack. For instance, I hid behind a mountain made of garbage and, in that brief moment, dissolved my impromptu shield and tried to bring my wand to bear. But the moment I emerged from shelter, the bullets rained down on me. Since my opponent had no head, and what's more, its upper body was turning round and round, no matter where I tried to hide or how many times I hid, the moment I came out, the machine guns started firing.

No weak spots, huh?

In that case—

“Looks like I need to get a little reckless—”

From my hiding spot, I used magic to lift up every single thing I could see scattered around me and blindly hurled it all in the direction of the gunfire.

For a moment, the bullets and the junk met in midair. The bullets shot right through and smashed all the trash to bits, but undeterred, I kept on endlessly flinging junk from my hiding place.

I had no way of knowing clearly where my opponent was. Even so, I continued my desperate counterattack until I sensed a response.

Then, finally—

I heard a dull *crash*, then right after that, the shooting stopped for a moment.

“...Got you, huh?”

That was my chance. Without pause, relying on momentum, I leaped from the shadows and leveled my wand.

I didn't have time to fire off any particularly strong spells. As soon as I caught sight of the magical doll staggering over the mounds of trash, I pointed my

wand at it and let loose.

The ball of magical energy that flew straight on like an arrow pierced the doll right in the stomach and disappeared.

If it had been a human, that alone would have been more than enough to deal a fatal wound, but the spell seemed to have little effect on the magical doll. It shook and staggered but then immediately pointed the muzzles of its guns at me once more.

But I wasn't planning to be on the receiving end of that gunfire again.

"Eiah!" I walked forward, swinging my wand. An ice boulder fell down from immediately above the magical doll and crushed its body flat.

"Hyah!" I approached, waving my wand sideways. A mass of garbage crashed full-on into the ice, smashing it to pieces.

"Rrrah!" Then I tapped the crumpled magical doll lightly with my wand. Immediately, vines of ivy sprouted from all directions and tore its body apart.

"....."

When I was done, there was no longer a magical doll left. It was nothing but debris.

That should be good enough, right?

"Now, if I just take this back to Flower Garden Theomea, the reward will be mine—*oh-hoh-hoh!*" Cackling like a villain, I waved my wand again and wrapped the ivy around the remains of the doll.

If I'm making an honest confession, at that time, I was under the impression that I had already completely defeated the magical doll. In short, to tell the unvarnished truth, I was careless.

That's why I didn't deliver a finishing blow or check that I had completely killed it.

The result was that in spite of how proud I was feeling of myself, I found myself on the receiving end of a counterattack like any other pleb.

".....!"

Apparently, this magical doll thing that was facing off against me was, despite its humanlike outward appearance, nothing like a human at all. Even after it had mostly been crushed, it forced its barely functioning arms and legs to move and pushed itself to its feet. Then, without a moment's hesitation, it grabbed me, brandishing a dagger.

It only took an instant.

I didn't even have time to ready my wand.

"—Ah!"

This is bad.

By the time I had that thought, the dagger was already pressing on my neck.

Ah, too bad. If this is how it ends, I should have just flown off on my broom and continued my travels, without getting carried away with a shortsighted get-rich-quick scheme. It is with great regret that I meet the end of my journey—

I was prepared for the worst, but—

But somehow or other, it seemed my end had not yet arrived.

"—Hup."

A calm and composed voice came from behind me. A pleasant floral scent gently tickled my nose, and immediately afterward, a bayonet pierced through the body of the magical doll in front of me, stabbing it time and time again. This time, for real, the doll broke into pieces.

I was still reeling from the doll's attack, and I fell onto my backside. Or maybe I collapsed from fear of imminent death.

"....."

Or maybe I was just dazed as I looked up at the person who had saved me.

Standing before me was an incredibly beautiful young woman.

Her hair was purple. It was cut into a short bob. Her eyes were green. There was no light behind them. Judging just from her appearance, she seemed to be my age or a little older. She was dressed in a sharp outfit—at least it seemed to be, but when I looked closer, I saw that it was pitifully ragged and filthy, ripped

to shreds. The sleeves were completely torn up, and her midsection was exposed. There was only a dangerously short length of skirt left.



The woman dressed in these unusual clothes had an unusual body as well.

Her left arm was completely missing from the shoulder down. Her legs had holes all over them and cracks in the skin. Parts of her face were crumbling even then, and bits were falling down onto the rubbish below.

“.....”

It was at that point that I realized I had somehow made a terrible mistake.

Thinking back very carefully, I had been told that the magical doll at the waste disposal facility was supposed to have been protecting the place for the last thirty years. Yet in spite of that, the magical doll I had just done battle against—or the doll-like thing—had obviously been brand-new.

If the doll had been living in a garbage dump for thirty years, and was malfunctioning, then at the very least, it wouldn't have maintained its outward appearance.

It's rather strange, isn't it, that the doll hadn't looked all tattered like the young woman in front of me.

“Hey.”

At that point, the woman in front of me finally turned to face me and held out her hand.

It was a battered hand, broken in places, and delicate. It was pitiful to look at, and it seemed like it might come right off if I pulled on it.

She smiled at me awkwardly over that hand and said, “Are you hurt, miss?”

She told me her name was Halverie.

And that she was the magical doll who protected the waste disposal facility.



At the waste disposal facility not far from Flower Garden Theomea...

Picking my way through the garbage and the flowers, I proceeded to the very back of the facility, where there was a small hut. That was the hut where Halverie, who protected the disposal facility, lived. It was her base of operations.

“Heh-heh-heh. Human, you are now my prisoner!”

The magical doll Halverie was wearing a bold grin.

“Coming to a place like this at a time like this... Are you by any chance here because you’re after my life? Heh-heh-heh. But I caught you, you see?”

It seemed like Halverie understood the situation she was in. After making her grand entrance and asking if I was hurt, she had gone right on to say, “Ah, please don’t move, all right?” Then she had tied me up with rope so that I couldn’t fight back and led me away to this one-room hut.

“Thank you for earlier. You saved my skin.” But I was a witch, so I was not nervous at all. “What a lovely place,” I remarked. “It’s like a secret hideout.”

I gazed vacantly around the room as she made me take a seat on the floor.

The tiny little hut felt cramped and was furnished only with a bed, a table, and a bookshelf. She seemed to have procured all sorts of things from the mountains of junk. On the bookshelf, she had books and figurines, plus some decorated plates and little stones. There were artificial flowers and ordinary scraps of paper and all sorts of other things displayed with pride. I struggled to understand exactly what sort of criteria she had used in gathering them all.

And stuffed under the table were bodies—the bodies of magical dolls, in relatively good condition. At first glance, they had the unsettling appearance of being a bunch of dismembered corpses crammed under there.

“You’ve got a good eye, human. This room is where I’ve gathered all the wonderful treasures I’ve collected over the long years. To me, this is paradise. The castle of cool.”

“Castle of cool? What’s that?”

From what I can see, you’ve only got a bunch of low-value stuff sitting around...

“By the way, human, what’s your name?” She sat in a chair and looked down at me.

“Elaina. I’m a traveling mage.”

“Heh-heh-heh, a mage, huh? There were a lot of people like you in my

hometown. How nostalgic.”

I had never visited, but presumably Flower Garden Theomea was a place with a lot of powerful magic. They had created beings like the woman before my eyes as much as thirty years ago, after all.

“So would it be correct to say that you are animated by magical energy?”

Though considering your origins, I feel like you are just brimming with humanity.

She didn’t seem to have any trouble discerning what I meant. As she set about covering the chipped part of her face with fresh material, she nodded wordlessly and closed her eyes.

“Once you’ve lived thirty years in a place like this, even things like emotions tend to sprout up,” she told me.

“Or perhaps...,” she continued, “...maybe I’m simply broken, from passing so many long months and years here.”

“By the way, I’d like it if you could untie me.”

A look at her appearance was more than sufficient to tell me that she was broken, but I had absolutely no idea why she had captured me.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, human.”

“It’s Elaina.”

“I’m used to people from my hometown coming after me, but recently, humans like you—foreigners from other lands—have started showing up at this waste disposal facility. Unless I give up on the place right now and run away, I’ll probably soon end up like all my other companions that have been abandoned here. Don’t you think, human?”

“It’s Elaina.”

“At any rate, I don’t want to die here. As thanks for saving your life—well, not exactly, but I’d be happy if I could get your help.”

She explained to me that she had wanted to capture a human like me, someone who didn’t know anything about her origins, to help her accomplish

her goal. Honestly, I had no idea what she wanted to do.

If you want to run away, can't you just do that?

Or maybe there's some reason why you can't?

At any rate, it is true that you saved me when I was in danger, so—

"I want you to stay silent and follow my orders just like a magical doll. Got it, human?"

"It's Elaina."

Anyway, I listened carefully to her plan or whatever.

The plan that Halverie, the magical doll, had devised, was as follows:

"First, we wait for just the right sort of thugs to come visit this waste disposal facility, looking to claim the bounty that's been placed on my head."

As luck would have it, I was not the only visitor at the waste disposal facility that day.

"Heh-heh-heh...listen, brother. If we can get paid just for smashing up some doll in this dump, that's easy money!"

"Sure is, heh-heh-heh."

A pair of guys who, judging from their appearances, seemed like very bad news, swaggered boldly into the waste disposal facility.

"Once the thugs appear, we will block their way. Incidentally, at that point, you'll be tied up with rope and tethered to my waist."

So we stepped out, following her instructions.

The fact of the matter was that her body was apparently a little peculiar, and she was limited in how she could act under her own power.

"I'm under orders from my hometown to protect this place and keep anyone from stealing anything, so no matter what I do, I can't leave here under my own power. At the same time, I can't injure innocent people. That's how I was built."

The government had probably started commissioning outsiders like myself because they didn't want to make their citizens face off against the broken

magical doll.

She had told me the story of how she ended up with a target on her back.

“Once, an official from Flower Garden Theomea came here, and I accidentally pointed a gun at him. It surprised me because by nature, a magical doll like me should have restrictions that keep me from injuring people—especially people from my homeland. And yet I had made the choice to injure someone. Strong emotions and the feeling that I had to point the gun at him had released me from my constraints.”

But apparently, it was very difficult for her to manifest a strong will like that on her own.

That was why she had chosen to take me as a hostage.

“Don’t move, you thugs! Are you listening? If you guys move one step from where you are, I will blow this girl’s pretty, cute face right off her head!” she threatened.

This is... How do I put it? This seems like it’s definitely going to result in her injuring someone if she doesn’t get out of here.

.....

Wait, wait, wait.

Isn’t this plan a little sloppy?

From the thugs’ perspective, what would they care if a complete stranger like me died? Plus, there was the possibility that Halverie would die alongside me.

“W-wait! Don’t be hasty, miss!”

But the thugs were, surprisingly, decent people.

“F-first things first, you set that dangerous thing down, okay?”

The two men looked desperately back and forth between me, with the gun muzzle pointed at the side of my head, and Halverie, who was making vague threats and trying to get them to retreat.

“I’m getting out of here. You hear me? If you lay a single finger on me, her life is forfeit, got it? Do you understand me?”

Halverie dragged me along behind her as she spoke. I was confused about what I was supposed to be doing, but for the moment I decided to scream like a hostage. “Kyaaaah! Help me!”

“Tch...what a despicable magical doll she is...!”

“If we don’t do something, the witch’s life is...!”

Well, actually, my life was never really in danger, but...

But I couldn’t interfere with Halverie’s plan, so for the time being, I did what was expected of me and wailed in a pitiful voice, “Waah! I don’t want to die!”

“Heh-heh-heh. She’ll remain like this until I am free. Until then, stay quiet and watch.”

Halverie kept on dragging me along. With no one to stop her progress anymore, she only had to keep walking straight for the border of the waste disposal facility.

And then—

“Now I am free—”

Just as she was about to take her first step out of the waste disposal facility—

“.....”

She stopped in her tracks.

I looked up, wondering why, and saw that she was standing stiffly, gazing up at the sky. Her body started shaking violently, and then she abruptly collapsed.

“L-looks like it’s no good...” Halverie was lying right beside me. “That always happens when I try to leave this place...”

She had to protect this waste disposal facility. She could not threaten a human life.

Those were the orders handed down to her thirty years prior, and she had faithfully continued to obey them. Actually, it was probably more like she had to obey them in order to survive.

“Not gonna work?”

“Ugh, not gonna work... Um, I’m really sorry to ask, but could I get you to take me back over to where we started, human?”

“It’s Elaina.”

No helping it, I guess.

I hauled myself to my feet and started walking. Since the rope tied around me was still tethered to Halverie’s waist, this time I was the one dragging her along behind me.

The two thugs didn’t seem to understand this sudden development at all, so I explained what I knew about Halverie’s situation.

These were the responses from the two virtuous thugs:

“Uh-huh...sounds like a tough lot...”

“Well, good luck. You can have this.”

As he cut the rope tied around me with his knife, one of them split off quite a large portion of his trail rations for us. Encountering such human kindness in a junkyard like that secretly made me want to cry.

“Uuugh... I can’t even eat field rations...because I’m a magical doll...”

Halverie, on the other hand, was still just shaking, lying facedown underneath me.

“Well...cheer up.” I clapped a hand down on her shoulder.

“Sniffle.”

“Are you crying?”

“Oh, this is oil.”

“You seem to be doing fine.”

After that, the virtuous thugs collected several pieces of junk they thought they could sell and went back home.

At that point, I suddenly realized something.

“Looks like that thing about you being broken is true, huh?”

“You can tell?” Halverie looked up from where she was still lying facedown.

I took a seat on a bookshelf that was lying on its side nearby and said, “Yes. I mean, you didn’t even do anything to those guys just now.” I popped a bit of the trail rations into my mouth. “Surely pointing a gun at people who come here with the intention of stealing things is part of the job of protecting the waste disposal facility, right?”

The men had boldly “borrowed” things right in front of Halverie, but even as they were picking things over, she had just sat there dribbling oil and never even pointed her gun at them.

I got the sense that a magical doll that was serious about her duties would never have let them get away.

She nodded.

“There was a time when I would have shot my gun the moment they touched anything in here. But as I am now, I sometimes deviate from my orders. I’m broken, you see.”

According to Halverie, she and the other magical dolls apparently operated on three main commands.

She listed those commands, in order of highest priority, counting on her fingers.

First, command number one—

“Follow all orders from my homeland.”

Command two—

“As long as it doesn’t interfere with command one, protect human life.”

And command three—

“As long as it doesn’t interfere with command one, protect my own life.”

Then she told me that she had been given only one original order: to protect the waste disposal facility.

In other words, essentially—

“I have to stay here, even at the cost of my own life.”

She had to protect this place, where magical dolls who had finished their

duties were interred.

She stood up and said, “This is a place I’m supposed to protect, but at the same time, it’s also my final resting place.”

She gazed outward, over the remains of the magical dolls that were spread across the whole facility.

Flowers swayed between the piles of debris.



Thirty years earlier.

As was clear from looking at Halverie, Flower Garden Theomea had always been quite technologically advanced. Even its garbage contained many things that might be valuable in other lands, and consequently, the government of Flower Garden Theomea had stationed a magical doll to protect its waste disposal facility.

That doll was Halverie.

And she worked single-mindedly.

If anyone strayed into the forest, she pointed her gun at them without a moment’s hesitation. If any animals tried to settle in the waste disposal facility, she drove them out immediately. Other than the times when garbage was delivered from Flower Garden Theomea, that’s what she did, constantly protecting the place in her own way.

Most of the waste that was delivered to the disposal facility was the remains of magical dolls that had reached the end of their useful lives. But sometimes, some unfamiliar things would be mixed in with them.

There were, for example, books, or cutlery, or cameras, or phonographs. All sorts of different things were constantly being thrown away.

For Halverie, the outside world was uncharted territory.

“...Unfamiliar things from an unknown world.”

That was why she was so curious.

Eventually, she started picking up the discarded items.

There were peaceful, lovely stories written in the books. The cutlery made nice noises when she threw it. The phonograph was full of songs from faraway places.

Even as she was left behind by the passing years, she kept on following her orders, all alone.

But time gradually changed her.

One day, she built a little hut. When something caught her fancy amid the mountains of rubbish, she took it there.

To human eyes, it was nothing but junk.

But to her, they were treasures she wouldn't trade for anything.

"This book is interesting." She didn't really understand what made something "interesting," but she was able to process the book's contents the same way she analyzed other information.

"This watch is stylish." She didn't really know whether that was true, but she liked the noise the watch made as it ticked away the time.

"These plates make a nice noise when I throw them." So she kept them, for stress relief. By that point, she already understood the concept of stress.

"This squirrel is cute." So she didn't point her gun at it, and pet it instead. Sitting atop her cold hand, the little squirrel narrowed its eyes, looking ticklish.

She was building her own tiny kingdom there in the deserted waste disposal facility.

"I am alone."

Before she knew it, she had developed an interest in the outside world, where all those unknown objects came from.

However, she kept upholding her important role.

The days and months of thirty years went past in that way.

Then, about six months before I met her—

A wagon was sent to the waste disposal facility from Flower Garden Theomea as always.

Ah, I wonder what kind of treasures it's carrying today. She was filled with joyful expectation; however—

“.....?”

But that day, the situation was a little bit different.

When the wagon stopped in front of the waste disposal facility, several people got out of it. It was the first time that had ever happened in thirty years. They had always tossed the load into the waste disposal facility and turned right back around.

So when the people who had gotten out of the wagon headed straight for her, she knew right away that something she had never experienced before was happening.

“Thank you for all your hard work.”

Her first response was to bow.

The person at the head of the group returned her bow and said, “Allow me to introduce you. This is a magical doll used for processing waste.”

The magical doll had arms and legs but no head. It could optionally split its arms into four, in order to carry lots of stuff. It seemed the dolls had been optimized in that way over a long period of time.

Without saying a word, the new model of magical doll bowed just once to Halverie.

“.....!”

She was thrilled. Her first coworker! Her heart was pounding; she desperately wanted to get along well with it.

“Um, hello. I am the magical doll of the waste disposal facility. My name is Halverie. I am thirty years old.”

So she slid over and snuggled up close to the new model.

“.....” No response. To begin with, the thing didn't even have a head, so she didn't have any idea where it was looking.

Even so, Halverie wasn't discouraged, and asked, “What's your name?”

“.....”

“Hmm?”

Ignoring me?

“Can you hear me?” Halverie poked it repeatedly with her finger and walked restlessly around and around the new model, and yet there was no response.

Wait, wait, but, by the way—

“Exactly what is the reason for introducing a new model?” Halverie asked the government officials.

She had thought she was doing her job at the waste disposal facility perfectly well on her own, after all.

The one who answered her question was the new model.

“.....”

Ka-chunk. It made a loud robotic sound, then spit out a slip of paper from an opening in its torso.

“A function like that, instead of talking!”

...It’s so cool!

She dashed over and pulled out the slip of paper, giggling to herself.

On it, Halverie told me, was scrawled a single sentence.

It said—

TO BE BLUNT, IT LOOKS LIKE YOU’RE BEING LAID OFF.

—or something to that effect.

“.....” She didn’t really understand the meaning of what was written there. “Hmm?” Halverie was puzzled. Despite being a magical doll, she had limited understanding.

One of the officials addressed her kindly. “Your disposal has been ordered. We are going to take you back to the city and disassemble you. Come along.”

“Huh? Wait—”

Seriously? Disposal? I'm being relieved already?

With a sidelong glance at the bewildered doll, the official issued an order to his companions, and they restrained her on the spot.

"No! I can still work! I'm excited to work! Please let me keep working!"

But the officials were merciless.

"Pipe down. So this is how broken you get after thirty years? Good grief..."

"New model! Help me!"

I CANNOT, the new model wrote unemotionally.

"You heartless thing!"

I CANNOT. The new model was pitiless.

"No, wait—"

Then, as the people from the city were dragging her away—

Something inside her snapped.

After that, she blacked out for a little while. When she came to, the new model was lying there in front of her, reduced to debris.

Over the long months and years, she had developed emotions. Her anger had overwhelmed her. The new model was battered and broken, while the government officials all ran away, screaming, "Eee! She wrecked it!"

And since that incident six months earlier, Halverie told me, the people from the city had been coming after her.

The days that followed were a little strange. As always, lost people and animals wandered into the waste disposal facility, and a wagon came with deliveries from Flower Garden Theomea, but at the same time, magical dolls designed for combat began to appear.

Though she was nearly an antique, built thirty years in the past, Halverie had been constructed with combat in mind. She fought reasonably well, even against the newer models.

Even so, it was a war of attrition.

Over the past six months, her body had gotten worn down.

“So that’s how I came to be in my present condition.”

We were back in her hut. Halverie shrugged.

She was missing an arm, and her face and legs were tattered. The way things were going, she wouldn’t survive much longer.

“So that’s why I wanted to escape from here at once, but—well, you know how that turned out.”

Since she was trapped in this place as if caught in a binding spell, all she could do was stay here and wait for death.

What a predicament.

“But I still have another plan.” She smiled boldly. “Currently, I can’t escape, but there is another method I can use to get out of here, human.”

“What’s that?”

Also, it’s Elaina.

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously, but Halverie didn’t seem to notice my reaction. She laughed in a somewhat stiff, monotone way and said, “I can do it if I cease to be myself.”



The reason why she was stuck in the waste disposal facility was because *she was Halverie, who had been assigned to protect the waste disposal facility thirty years ago.*

Which meant she could escape if she replaced every bit of her body with a new part and became someone else. But in her present condition, she could only move one arm properly. That was how battered she was.

Which must have been why she wanted to enlist someone else’s help.

“So what should I do first?”

“Good question. I think I’d like to get you to fix my arm first of all,” she said while slipping off her top. She showed no hesitation in exposing her bare skin, perhaps because we were both girls.

Her skin was battered and covered in scars.

“I no longer have my left arm from the shoulder down.” She presented her left shoulder to me, and I saw that there were a number of ragged threads protruding from it. “I ran out of spare parts a long time ago. But there are arms from other magical dolls under the table, so please connect one of those.”

“...Mm-hmm.” I did as I was told and pulled a magical doll arm out from under the table. “...How am I supposed to attach it?” I tilted my head to the side in puzzlement.

“There’s a red thread sticking out of my shoulder.”

Mm-hmm.

“This?” I tugged on it.

“Wah!” Halverie shouted.

“...What?”

What is it now?

“My body is finely tuned and highly sensitive, so please don’t be so forceful.”

“Uh-huh...”

What a pain...

Well, but if that’s what you want, then that’s what I’ve got to do. I guess I should be gentle about it? I usually use magic to get things like this done; this isn’t really a specialty of mine...

Starting off with a light touch, like I was stroking her shoulder, I took hold of her and—

“Hyah!”

“...What?”

Come on, seriously?

“My body is finely tuned and highly sensitive, so please don’t touch me like that.”

“What do you mean, ‘like that’?”

“In a perverted way.”

“I do not understand what you’re saying.”

“I’m asking for the perfect touch, not too gentle or too forceful.”

“You’re very demanding.”

“I just want you to touch me with love, out of respect for my years.”

“Oh, is that all? All right, how about this?”

“Kyah!”

She glared up at me, her eyes narrowed. “Are you possibly doing that on purpose?”

“This is pretty much what my love is like.”

“You’re really twisted...”

The damage went far beyond Halverie’s left arm. According to what she said, she wouldn’t be totally fixed until we swapped out almost every part of her.

This was further complicated by the fact that none of the bodies perfectly matched an antique magical doll like her, so there were some parts we would have to make from scratch.

And, she told me, she unfortunately had not gathered up all the bodies she needed yet.

Which meant...

Once I fixed her arm...

Halverie and I immediately went fishing through the mountains of rubbish.

“Heh-heh-heh. Now that I’ve got two arms, I’ve got nothing to fear!!”

“Oh, I’ve read this book before. It’s pretty interesting. Have you read it, Halverie?”

Halverie and I fished through the mountains of rubbish.

“Human. Could I ask you to take the search for my body seriously?”

“Sure. By the way, Halverie, what’s that you’ve got in your hand?”

“It’s a plate. They make great noises when they break.”

Halverie and I fished through the mountains of rubbish.

“Halverie. Did you know this? If you pinch this grass between your fingers and blow through it, it makes a great noise. Here, listen. *Phwee!*”

“Whoa, cool! Do it again, please?”

“Phwee!”

“Amazing! By the way, would you actually take this search seriously?”

“Phwee...”

Halverie and I fished through the mountains of rubbish.

“We’re not making any progress at all, human...” Halverie had a faraway look in her eyes.

“I wonder why that is... How strange...” I also had a faraway look in my eyes.

Before we knew it, the sun was setting, and the day was coming to an end. The results of our efforts were that we had collected several pieces of rubbish, some broken plates, and some bits of bug-eaten grass.

A sense of emptiness assailed us, like when you find some nostalgic object in the middle of cleaning your room and end up carelessly spending way too much time on it.

“Let’s place our hopes in our tomorrow selves, human.”

“Yes, let’s.”

Even as we said those corny lines, we knew we were the kind of people who weren’t going to do our best tomorrow, either. But there was no way we were going to admit it.

I ended up sleeping in her little hut that night. The room was a total mess, but there was enough space for one human being like me to lie down.

“Heh-heh-heh. How inconvenient to be a human. Imagine being unable to function without sleeping for several hours each day.”

The night wore on, and as I was preparing my bedroll, Halverie opened up a

book. It was a light entertainment novel that had been popular quite some time ago.

“You don’t need to sleep?” I asked as I lay down on my bedroll.

“No. I just deactivate my functions temporarily whenever I swap out a body part. Then I reboot immediately, so if you count that time as time spent sleeping, it’s about thirty seconds.”

“My goodness, you’re quite the hard worker.”

“It’s because I’m powered by magical energy.”

A place like this out in the forest was sure to be brimming with magical energy, so there was probably no risk of her ever running out. Truly, aside from the threats to her life, it was an ideal environment for a magical doll like her. Leaving aside the question of whether or not it was a “castle of cool.”

“Heh-heh-heh. That means I can get started on a new book while you’re sleeping, human. I suppose not having any downtime is a special privilege of us magical dolls.”

“I suppose it is,” I answered with a yawn. “But sleeping the day away is a special privilege of us humans.”

I pulled up my blanket and closed my eyes.

In a world covered with darkness, her voice alone echoed gently like a lullaby.

“Aren’t humans jealous of our bodies, which don’t need to sleep?”

“Well, sure, to an extent,” I replied. “But I also appreciate the idle time before I fall asleep in its own way, so I can’t say I’m entirely envious.”

“...Is that so?” she replied in a subdued voice.

Before long, she whispered, so quietly I could barely hear it, “I’m envious of you.”

I wondered whether that was because I had been traveling through a world she had never seen. Or maybe because I was able to rest for several hours at a time. Or perhaps there was some other reason.

But I didn’t respond to her words. I just quietly let my breathing slow and

pretended to be asleep. I couldn't find the words to answer her, so I ran away.

Perhaps this kind of sneaky trick could also be called a special privilege of humans.



The following morning, we continued our quest to repair her body as she defended the waste disposal facility.

New parts were absolutely necessary in order to repair her. But the stuff that was brought to the waste disposal facility was all worn out. None of it was in very good condition. And besides that, since there was so much rubbish, it was going to take quite a lot of time to search through it all.

My goodness, what a dilemma. There's no way we'll gather up all the parts we need to fix her like this, is there?

But unexpectedly, the issue of the spare parts wound up having a fairly simple solution.

In addition to the worn-out old parts, some clean, brand-new ones turned up.

"Hyaaaah!"

I waved my wand.

"Hi-yah."

Halverie fired her gun.

There in front of us was one of the new models of magical doll, just like the one that had been sent over from Flower Garden Theomea the day before.

It would have been difficult to challenge it solo, but it was not that hard to fight it two-on-one. We demolished the new model, as if doing some light exercise after breakfast, and recovered the parts.

I don't suppose I have to tell you what we did after that.

"Hyah!"

Repair.

"Please don't make weird noises."

The second day I was there, I rebuilt her battered legs. The design of the legs on the new model apparently didn't suit her tastes very well—she had complained that they weren't attractive enough.

So I used Halverie's own spare legs for the outer casing and only used the new model's parts for the interior mechanisms.

"I made these legs out of random parts we collected, but they're quite well done, don't you think?"

When they were finished, the legs that we installed on her were so pretty that they may well have been mistaken for real human legs. They were surprisingly soft to the touch, with an almost skin-like texture.

"Oh my, are you interested in my legs, human?"

"....."

I stared up at her.

She tilted her head, setting her purple hair swaying.

"I was just thinking, it's a little strange," I answered.

"What is?"

"I wonder why the bodies of the new models are so different from human bodies, when you, who were made to protect this place, have a body that is nearly human?"

I would think that if they were upgrading them, they would make the dolls' appearances even more humanlike.

But thirty years had gone by, and the magical dolls from Flower Garden Theomea had apparently taken on a more artificial form. They were now very obviously not human.

I wonder why that is?

"It's to clearly distinguish the roles of people and magical dolls," she answered me in a definite tone. "Magical dolls can never become people."

But I dare say that as far as I could see, the magical doll named Halverie seemed to be extraordinarily humanlike.

While we were searching through the rubbish, she would shout, “Ah! What a great plate!” and start smashing, and when someone showed up trying to destroy her, she would block their way, spouting very human lines like “If you want to steal something from here, you’ll have to go through me!”

She seemed to have clear human emotions.

If she read a funny book, she laughed.

I often heard her right before I fell asleep, chuckling softly as she read a book. When I asked her if it was funny, I always got the same answer.

“I just start laughing without knowing why. If this feeling is called ‘funny,’ then I suppose this book is funny.”

If she found a beautiful flower, she would be happy.

She never picked any of the beautiful flowers, but her eyes looked full of affection as she stroked the blossoms growing up between the piles of junk.

Whenever she came across a fellow doll that was broken and dead, she became very somber.

“...Good work, friend,” she said as she gently lifted the ruin of a fellow doll that had been discarded by her homeland.

“Grrrah!” Whenever a new model of magical doll showed up, she leveled her gun at it without hesitation, as she had been doing day after day.

She went on replacing parts of her own body with parts we picked up and parts she recovered from dolls she destroyed with her own hands. After fixing her missing arm and her legs, we repaired her face.

“How about it, human? Is my face pretty? Heh-heh-heh.”

Halverie looked at me with her newly constructed face.

“Let’s see... Sure it is, in its own way.”

Also, it’s Elaina. Do you think you could remember my name already? Is that so hard? Oh, I see.

Anyway—

The days went by like that.

We gathered things out of the trash, destroyed any magical doll intruders, and embedded new parts into Halverie's body like a patchwork.

The parts that had served their purpose and been discarded gradually piled up, until it seemed like it might be possible to make a duplicate of Halverie by skillfully assembling the stack of old parts.



In this way, the repairs to her body proceeded well.

In fact, maybe a little too well.

“Kyaaaaaahhh...!”

On the fifth day after I had started helping her—

We were facing down a new doll that had arrived from Flower Garden Theomea, as usual, when for some reason, Halverie suddenly threw herself at the doll in a suicide attack.

Her body collapsed with a horrible shriek, and her head popped off and went flying.

“A-are you okay?!”

In a panic, I caught the head.

Simultaneously, I smashed the new doll to bits with a spell.

“I guess being in too good of shape can also be a problem.”

Luckily, both her body and her head were undamaged. Though they had come apart.

“What were you doing?” I was in disbelief as I carried her head over to her body, which was lying there on top of the trash like a corpse. Apparently, the body couldn’t move without the head.

“The abilities my body has and the memories inside of me don’t sync up.” She let out a sigh. “I thought I was functioning normally, but...it looks like I need some adjustments.”

“I don’t really understand how your body and your memories could not sync...”

“To put it in human terms, it’s like having a young body but an incredibly brilliant mind.”

“A young body but a brilliant mind...?”

In other words, you’re describing me...?

“Human, self-confidence and pretension are two different things.”

“Should I go on and throw your head away, then?”

We argued as I approached her body. Suppressing the urge to chuck her head as far as I could throw it, I set it down near her neck instead.

“Thank you...”

Her body was successfully reunited with her separated head, but Halverie remained as weak as she had been when they were apart.

What’s this?

“What’s the matter? Your body won’t move?”

“No...” She shook her head and remained stretched out on the ground. “I’m adjusting my power levels. Hang on a second.”

“Uh-huh...”

I wasn’t sure how to respond, but I decided to behave myself and wait patiently for her to finish. To kill time, I picked at the broken remains of some nearby magical dolls or pushed them around with my foot. I had way too much time on my hands.

“.....”

Eventually, I looked at her, lying on the ground. At the broken new model, and at the young woman lying beside it.

Our positions were reversed this time, but I had a definite sense of déjà vu.

“Sorry for the wait, human.”

So when she was done adjusting her power levels and tried to sit up, I extended a hand.

“Are you hurt, miss?”

She looked at my hand curiously and said, “Thank you.”

Then, not too gently and not too forcefully, but with the perfect touch, she took my hand and told me, “I owe you a great debt.”

My goodness, what a dilemma.

“Didn’t you know? I feel the same way about you.”

The days went on and on.



The night of the fifth day—

I greeted the end of the day from atop my bedroll, as always.

“We’re done—”

After five days, we had collected most of the spare parts for Halverie’s body. She had just finished assembling the final part, and she set it down on the table with a *thunk*.

“...What part of you does that fit into?”

The part was a perfectly round lump of inorganic matter about the size of a fist. It was obviously meant to fit inside her somewhere.

“Right here.” She pointed to her chest. “Once I change this out, all of my parts will have been replaced.”

She had told me something when we first met.

“—I can do it if I cease to be myself.”

If she could do that, she might be able to get out of the waste disposal facility.

“Are you going to swap it out right now?”

I sat up in bed and looked at her, but Halverie slowly shook her head. “No. Right now, I want to read. Let’s work on it tomorrow morning.”

She sat down in her shabby-looking chair and smiled. I guess it was her usual habit. Whenever I looked over at her before going to sleep, she always had a book open.

“Is that book any good?”

In her hands was a familiar book. I had also read it previously. It was a book I had found in a mountain of rubbish on the day I arrived at the waste disposal facility, and I had recommended it to her.

I was happy to see she was interested in reading it, but— “I only just started reading it, so I don’t know.”

She shook her head.

She had only turned the first few pages of the book in her hands. The story was just beginning.

“Oh really?”

Well then, certainly you wouldn't know, would you?

“I can't wait to hear what you think about it.”

Well then, good night. I pulled the covers up and closed my eyes.

It was the same scene as always.

Always the same scene, never changing.

Ever since I had arrived, *Halverie had been reading the same book, and never made it past the beginning.*

Halverie was a magical doll, and the act of swapping out the parts of her body and changing into a different version of herself was probably somewhat close to discarding herself.

It was on day two that I became convinced she had changed from the person I had initially met.

When I'd asked Halverie about the difference between her and the new-type magical dolls, she had given me a clear and concise answer.

“It's to clearly distinguish the roles of people and magical dolls.”

“Magical dolls can never become people.”

I had been curious how exactly Halverie had learned about the outside world, even though she had never left the disposal facility for thirty whole years.

It must have been through her new body parts.

Each time she swapped out a part, she changed into a different version of herself.

She must have been aware of it—she had to know that each time she swapped parts, she turned into someone new.

She must have looked at humans like me with envy.

Because even when we went to sleep, we woke up as exactly the same person.

But she was different. Once she swapped out a part and went through the thirty-second temporary shutdown, the person who opened her eyes was a different version of herself.

To her, sleep was the same as death. Even if she transferred part of her memory, she lost some of herself along with whatever part she'd exchanged.

The following morning—

Halverie opened up her own chest and said, "All right, human, this is your last job." Her inorganic innards were exposed. "Please swap this part for me. If you do that, I will surely be free."

"....."

In order to survive for so long, Halverie had to abandon many worn-out parts, along with many memories.

Doing so had been the only way she was able to live.

"Got it."

I nodded and reached out toward her chest.

Over the past few days, I had gotten used to helping her with these operations. I pulled out the part where her heart would go and fit the new part right in.

The operation was over quickly.

Then, for just thirty seconds, she closed her eyes.

Before long, she woke up.

"Hello, human."

She smiled.

I answered.

Wearing an identical smile.

"It's Elaina."

Right to the very end, you never remembered my name, did you?



After a month had passed, I headed toward Flower Garden Theomea.

I saw that word of its incredible magical technology was no exaggeration. At the café I visited, new-type magical dolls were milling around inside without saying a word to anyone.

I sat alone in a seat on the terrace, drinking my coffee as I read the newspaper.

IS THAT NEWS ITEM OF INTEREST TO YOU?

A magical doll with no head stopped in front of my table and emitted a slip of paper from its chest with those words written on it.

In my hand, I was holding an article about a particular waste disposal facility.

“...Yeah. Sure, I guess it is.”

IF YOU LIKE, I WOULD BE HAPPY TO EXPLAIN THE MATTER.

My goodness.

“Is that another service offered by this café?”

AS YOU SAY.

“...What a great service.”

HONORED TO SERVE.

Then the doll standing beside me started pulling out a long strip of paper.

It said—

The magical doll at the waste disposal facility that had been identified as a threat by the government had been discovered a month earlier, completely broken.

It had been carefully dismantled and the pieces scattered part by part, bit by bit, all around the center of the facility.

Since Theomea had put out a request to all its neighbors for the destruction of the old-type magical doll named Halverie, it was assumed that a stranger had

disposed of her without anyone knowing.

But the curious thing was that the person who disposed of her hadn't made a single appearance in the month following. Even though Theomea had prepared one hundred gold coins as a cash reward, there had been no word from anyone.

Ultimately, the question of who had destroyed Halverie remained a mystery, and the government had decided to install new magical defense turrets—that was the story.

WE TRIED TO COLLECT THE PARTS OF THE OLD MODEL AND REACTIVATE IT, BUT STRANGELY, THIS OLD MODEL WOULD NOT START AGAIN. CURRENTLY, ITS REMAINS HAVE BEEN LEFT AT THE WASTE DISPOSAL FACILITY.

That was the explanation from the waiter about the sequence of events that happened one month prior.

DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS? asked the waiter.

I cocked my head.

“What do you think about this article—about this old-type magical doll?”

WHAT DO I THINK?

“Why do you think this magical doll wasn't able to wake up again? If you don't mind, I'd like to hear your opinion, please.”

I HAVE NO THOUGHTS OF MY OWN.

It didn't seem able to answer me.

“...I suppose not.”

HAVE I ANSWERED ALL YOUR QUESTIONS?

“Yes.”

I nodded, and the waiter, having finished its duties, left my table and went back to its job. Just like Halverie, it wasn't able to tell me its opinion.

That was a little bit disappointing, but even so, one thing about my conversation with the waiter set my mind at ease.

One month earlier—

“—For now, let's leave all the parts we replaced around here.”

Right before Halverie left the waste disposal facility.

I stood in a clearing that was full of junk, and after carefully dismantling the old parts we had finished replacing, I scattered them around the area.

“.....? What are you doing?” Halverie screwed up her face. “Huh? Is this some new type of bullying?”

No, no, nothing like that.

“I’m making it look like you died. If there’s a body, you can get away without people from your hometown chasing you.”

From the beginning, the people of Flower Garden Theomea had been trying to destroy her because she was already broken. If she suddenly disappeared one day without leaving a body behind, they would naturally search high and low to make sure the broken doll was not posing any danger in neighboring lands.

Then there would be no point to her running away.

“We’re faking your death.”

The real Halverie wasn’t dead yet.

But it would be more convenient if we pretended she was.

“I see. That’s a good idea, human.”

She seemed satisfied as she watched me work and clapped a hand down on my shoulder.

“Human,” is it?

“In the outside world, you’ve got to be sure to remember people’s names, okay? If you go around calling every person you meet ‘human,’ who knows who might zero in on you?”

If she wants to travel around and see the outside world like anyone else, the best thing to do would be to pretend to be normal.

“You don’t need to worry about it. I won’t act like that in the outside world. If I behaved like that in the human world, it would be obvious that I was not human myself.”

“But you haven’t been calling me by my name.”

Not that I really care, but—

Then she said, “Would you rather I did, Miss Elaina?”

Tilting her head, she readily called me by name.

“You remembered?”

“Of course. I’ve never forgotten your name. I had my own reasons preventing me from calling you by your name until now.”

“Reasons?”

Like what?

“The version of me from five days ago entrusted something to the present version of me—something I absolutely had to abide by each time I changed out a body part.”

She told me—

“The imperative to call the virtuous young woman who was guiding me toward escaping the waste disposal facility ‘human.’”

“.....?”

Why would you make yourself do such a strange thing?

I screwed up my face in confusion, and she told me everything.

“We performed many repairs over these past five days, and I had no way of predicting exactly what effects they would have on me. There was a possibility I might lose all my memories of the past thirty years. I avoided calling you by name from the start so that I wouldn’t be rude to you in the event that I ran into some kind of trouble mid-repair and forgot your name.”

Then her explanation came to a finish.

“These heavy-handed repairs were unknown territory for me.”

Just like the outside world.

“.....”

In other words, she had done it out of consideration, in order to avoid causing

me too much worry.

I had been certain that she had forgotten my name, along with the contents of her book—I had even felt a little bit depressed about it.

As it turned out, that was all the reason there was to it.

Way to make me laugh.

“Did you know?” I said just before we parted. “In the human world, that’s called thoughtfulness.”

And it goes without saying, it’s a special privilege of us humans.

“...I’ll remember that.”

Then she took one step beyond the border of the waste disposal facility.

She stepped forward into unknown territory.

But I was certain she wouldn’t have any problems, even though she knew nothing of the outside world. Because I had come to know how she dealt with things.

“Well then, I guess this is good-bye,” she said to me.

“I guess it is—” I nodded, then turned around abruptly.

Spread out before me were the remains of magical dolls, covering the whole area. The place was littered with objects that no longer functioned.

Flowers swayed in the gaps between the wreckage.



A lone traveler was walking through a certain city.

The people of the city turned to look back at her every time she passed.



The young woman had a very, very mysterious aura about her.

Her hair was purple. It was cut into a short bob. Her eyes were green. There was no light behind them. Judging just from her appearance, she seemed to be in her twenties. She was dressed in a sharp outfit—at least it seemed to be, but on closer inspection, it was pitifully ragged and filthy, ripped to shreds. The sleeves were completely torn up, and her midsection was exposed. There was only a dangerously short length of skirt left.

The young woman clad in these pitiful clothes was carrying an enormous satchel on her back.

More than her shabby clothing, more than her surprisingly pretty face, the people of the city stared at what she had on her back.

She had a clock that was old and worn. And a phonograph. Books that had been read over and over again. A stack of plates.

A huge collection of what seemed like ordinary junk filled her bag, sticking up over the top.

But she walked on, carrying that junk on her back with pride.

By the way, the city she had arrived at that day was a somewhat dangerous and lawless place.

“What the hell?! I already apologized, didn’t I?!”

A young woman had fallen on her backside on the ground and was looking up at a man. There was fear in her eyes.

She looked like she had been struck. Her cheek was red and swollen.

“This ain’t over just ‘cause ya said, ‘Sorry for bumping you.’ Got it? What’re ya gonna do about these clothes? What’re ya gonna do about my drink that’cha wasted?”

The man standing over the woman was holding a liquor bottle. He appeared to already be fairly drunk, in the middle of the day, as he was slurring his words somewhat. But he was still gulping down alcohol even as he threatened her.

“You’re the one who started it by running into me, aren’t you? Drinking like

that in the middle of the day—”

“Huh? Shaddup! It’s up to me when I wanna drink!”

“.....” The woman was already cowering, and she shrank even more as he shouted. “F-fine then, I’ll pay you for it. So just forgive me...”

“No way. Ya can’t fix this with money.”

“Well then, tell me what to do!”

At those words, a smile came over the man’s face.

“Let’s see now. We can start with your body—”

He was about to say something, when...

—*Smash!*

...the bottle in the man’s hand burst open.

“.....Huh?”

He was dumbfounded by this sudden turn of events.

Beside him stood the traveler.

“Next I’ll blow *this* away,” the woman said to him in an extremely cold voice. In her hands was a rifle.

The muzzle was thrust toward the man’s head.

“.....! E-eeek!”

The blood instantly drained from the man’s face, and he immediately stammered out, “J-just joking! I—I don’t need a thing!” He put his hands up and fled the scene.

It was over in a flash.

“.....”

The stunned woman looked up at the traveler.

“Here,” the traveler said before she put the gun away and offered her hand.

Her hand was very, very beautiful. It was so impeccable that it almost looked fake.

The traveler smiled awkwardly as she said: “Are you hurt, miss?”

Afterword

Chapter Comments ✂ Beware of spoilers!

- Chapter 1 The Case of the Blood-Drenched Diner

I came up with the idea for a character with puppets on her hands, and for some reason, she turned into a detective. It took quite a lot of time to reconcile the contents of this chapter with the other stories, but somehow, I'm delighted with the character of the Puppet Detective. If you read Chapter 5, I think you'll more or less understand the reason why she touched Wine Lady's chest.

- Chapter 2 Attention and Praise

This isn't limited to creative works, but sometimes things gain a bizarre level of popularity for reasons that have nothing to do with their original design. They receive a lot of attention for a short time, then completely disappear from people's memories as time goes on. I often wonder whether they are popular because people like them or for some other reason.

- Chapter 3 Just a Story About People Who Want to Eat Some Tasty Meat

When a strange person starts clamoring in support of something strange, at first, people just give them a chilly look, but if it goes on for a long time, I think the strange thing ceases to be strange. More and more people continue raising their voices to endorse it. Then before you know it, society has changed, and the people who at first just gave chilly looks have become the strange ones.

- Chapter 4 The House of Fluttering Birds

I came up with the idea for this story when I was in middle school or thereabouts, and actually, if I'm not mistaken, I even uploaded it to a story sharing site a long time ago, but, well, since this is a rare chance to get my work out into the world, I realized I could rewrite it as a chapter of *Journey of Elaina*. By the way, I'm not really sure if bird brains and human brains are similar in any way.

- Chapter 5 Moonlight Vampire

I've been wanting to write a story featuring a vampire for a while now, but no matter how hard I tried, they all turned out so serious, so I was disappointed for a long time. Also, the vampire put too many constraints on the story.

The end of this chapter leads into the start of Chapter 1.

- Chapter 6 Beasts

After humans hunted the wolves of Yellowstone National Park to extinction, the ecosystem collapsed. The herbivores proliferated out of control, greenery was lost, and wildlife disappeared in a chain reaction. About twenty years ago, wolves were rereleased into the national park. Since then, the park seems to be returning to its natural state.

- Chapter 7 Junk Princess

The thought experiments known as the Ship of Theseus and the Chinese Room form the basis for this story. To summarize the Ship of Theseus, it poses the question, "If an object has its parts continually replaced, until it no longer has a single original part, is it still the original object?" The Chinese Room takes longer to explain, so I'll ask you to Google it, but in short, it's a way of simply representing conversations between humans and AI. At the end of my story, I chose to have Halverie escape her box.

That concludes my comments on the chapters.

And so once again, greetings, I am Jougi Shiraishi.

I've long been plagued by a mysterious phenomenon, where, as my work accumulates, so too do my deadlines accelerate. And as a result, I finally got just a little bit of time to myself when I finished Volume 11, so I went on a little trip. I just went out to the country, though. I didn't even leave my prefecture.

I sat absentmindedly on a stone bench beneath trees swaying in the wind, ate seasonal fish, and slept like the dead at home. That was how I spent the day. It was the best. I also went to a café and read a book, which had a certain aesthetic appeal.

Describing it like that would give the impression that the day passed in an

incredibly brilliant fashion, just as planned, but actually, that's not what happened at all.

All right then, let's take a look at how I really spent my day off.

A certain place in Aichi. Apparently known for salt-grilled sweetfish and skewered mochi rice cakes. I sat down on a bench, and before too long, I started seeing people pass by sporadically. Among them was the shopkeeper of a store operating nearby, who walked past just as I was getting hungry. *Yay! Mochi skewers!* I thought as I walked into the shop.

"Excuse me, are you open yet?" I passed through the shop curtain, full of expectation.

The shopkeeper saw me and said briefly, "Huh? No, not yet..."

"....."

Too early...

Business hours didn't start for another two hours. I was obviously too early. As you would expect, I couldn't wait for two hours, so I gave up on getting salt-grilled sweetfish and skewered mochi. On my way back, I stopped in at a café with a cozy, homey atmosphere, and as I was idly reading my book, I had a flash of inspiration. "Ah, I've got it! I can just buy sweetfish at the supermarket!"

I just have to go about it from a different angle! Create my own experience!

So as for how that turned out, there wasn't any sweetfish, even at a reasonably large supermarket. Instead, there were tightly packed rows of saury. I looked it up later and found out that sweetfish is only in season from early-to midsummer. That's why there wasn't any.

Ultimately, I couldn't completely disregard my longing for sweetfish, so I compromised with the saury. But later, after I went to bed, I soaked my pillow with tears, moaning, "Augh...I want to eat sweetfish..." It didn't go to plan at all.

Well anyway, even so, that one day off was certainly worthwhile, and next time I think I'd like to go solo camping. A quiet day is nice now and then.

I will say that next time, I want to do a really good job preparing ahead of time, though.

By the way, I'm changing the subject, but this series is definitely becoming an anime.

I think I was only about twenty years old when I first started writing *Journey of Elaina*, but from the very beginning, one of my big goals was to have Elaina's story depicted in anime format. But I'm sure something like that is the dream for anyone who aims to become a light novel author, and for a long time I had no idea how to reach that point or if I would ever get there. I puttered around for a long time, never losing sight of that goal. I feel pure joy at the fact that I was finally able to reach this day. Truly, thank you so much for supporting me this far. I look forward to your continued support.

Things are starting to get underway with the anime. I met the director, as well as the scriptwriter and the producer and all sorts of other people, and I got to chat with them, even though I was trembling with fear at the magnitude of the position I had been placed in. Without exception, they are all tremendous people, and as I stood there freaking out in an unfamiliar space, I could really get a sense for the unbelievably enormous number of people who are now involved with this property.

It makes me truly happy that this story, which I initially started writing without any expectations, like someone taking the same entrance exam year after year because I couldn't completely give up on my dream of becoming an author, has now turned into a tale that ties together so many people.

Also, the release of the third drama CD is set.

It was already set when the second one came out, but no matter what, I just couldn't accept having some characters that only served to liven up the drama CD and then disappeared, so I wrote the script hoping to make a drama CD that would give every character a highlight. If the third CD, which comes out alongside Volume 12, turns out that way, that would be great.

...But since I'm the kind of guy who arrives at a sightseeing spot way too early and doesn't get to eat sweetfish or mochi skewers and has to settle for saury, when it comes to the work of writing the script for the third drama CD, I want to be painstaking with my time management...no, really.

And so on to the acknowledgments.

To M, the head editor.

Thank you, as always. This time, you really didn't have much time, and I caused you a lot of trouble, but I'm grateful that you quietly kept an eye on me without hurrying me too much.

To Azure.

You went back to the beginning for this cover, huh...? It's incredible, as always... I want to hang it on the wall next to the cover for Volume 1...

In Volume 10, I didn't have enough pages and wasn't able to thank you properly, so I'm glad I get to do it here. Truly, thank you so much. I look forward to seeing what you draw for the third CD.

To the editor in charge of the comic adaptation, Itsuki Nanao.

Thank you for your constant support. I'm so sorry I didn't put out a promotional tweet for the comic in time... As one of your readers, I always enjoy reading the comics as soon as I see your name. I'm changing the subject, but congratulations for taking first place in the Next Manga Award contest with *The Apothecary Diaries*!

To everyone involved with this property.

We have an anime adaptation, a comic adaptation, a drama CD adaptation, and the original books. I'm truly delighted that, through this mix of media, so many people have engaged with my stories. I hope we can continue working together from here on out.

So yeah, I think it's about time to wrap up this afterword.

Let's meet again in Volume 12. See you there!

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